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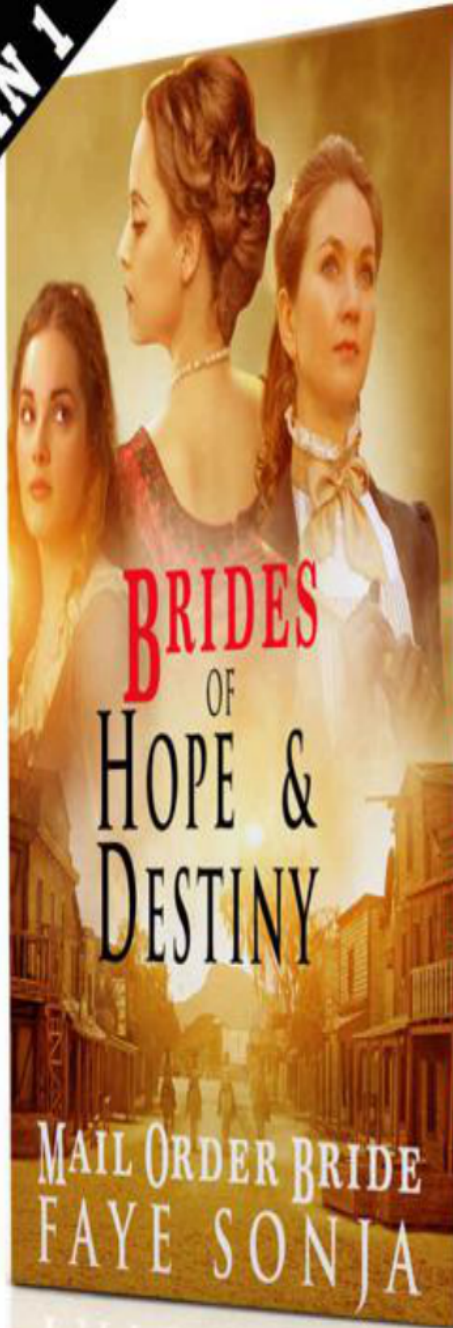


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Publishers Notes

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BRIDES OF HOPE & DESTINY

1

UNEXPECTED BRIDE FOR TWO BROTHERS

PROLOGUE

* * *

1877, Georgia.

Dear Jenny,

I look forward to meeting you in four weeks. However, I regret to inform you that due to issues with the estate, my attention is needed here and I cannot leave to meet you at the Fort Worth train station. Instead, my brother who has recently returned from the war will be there in my place instead. I trust him with my life and so I must ask that you do the same. He will travel the three weeks it will take you to get to me, and will ensure you are comfortable.

I again apologize, but I cannot leave the place that is to be our home together in the wake of the passing war. I trust and hope you understand this and I look forward to starting a life with you.

Your love to be,

Adam

Jenny read the letter again and again, as she listened to the torrential rainfall outside her window. It had been raining for days in the Georgian plains, as if the heavens were trying to wash away all the blood that had been shed throughout the war; the war that cost her both her father and her brother. Now, she only dreams of moving far away and starting over.

"Are you okay Mrs. Martin?" Sammy, her house help asked.

She nodded, smiling sadly up in his chocolate face. She was going to miss him when she left. He had not just been someone who had worked for her father's estate, he had been one of her best friends, possibly the truest of them all. She would have carried him with her to Texas, but he had just started his own family and he just couldn't leave them behind. It was an accomplishment that he was proud of and she truly understood.

"My husband to be cannot meet me at the train station, so he will be sending his brother along to meet me instead."

Sammy looked at her concerned. "And you will still go?"

"I will. I know I don't want to be here anymore."

Sammy's sad sigh was enough to tell her he did not approve of her choice to travel such long distances with a man she was being given of no choice to meet, and she had in fact considered the possibility that such a risk could indeed put her in danger, but she was still set on making the trip. She wanted out of this state, bloodied with the lives of the innocents lost, and she wanted to finally have the chance at a family of her own. For this she would travel the distance, by whatever means necessary.

* * *

CHAPTER 1

* * *

Jenny took a long walk through the downtown market place. It had always been one of her most favorite things to do. The smell of the spices that offered their aromatic therapy of an extremely soothing kind and the sound of the children who ran about, escaping from one act of mischief to the next with childish enthusiasm and squeals. The train whistled along the tracks somewhere off in the distance and a carriage that seemed to need a bit of oil on its hinges squeaked by.

Today was a good day. It was a day that made it seem as if the war had not ravished the once prosperous state, though the smiles that hid the pain of all that was lost wouldn't be convincing enough to fool her. She could turn her head to the heavens and try to enjoy the warmth of the sunshine, pretending that nothing was wrong and trying not to look as though she was falling apart inside, but for how long could she expect herself to live like this?

Not very long.

"Come to bid me adieu?" asked Simms, the old black woman who had been like a mother to her.

She had no words, only tears and the feeling that she was leaving behind one of the closest people she'd ever known. "Come with me, please," she begged the old woman.

"Listen here young lady. You don't need an old woman like me following you halfway across this bloody country when you are looking for love. You go on now, and you make yourself happy!"

Simms said, pulling her in closely for a hug. She had asked her a million times before, but on the day she was finally leaving, Jenny didn't think one more time could possibly hurt.

She had loved this fragile old woman, who despite being close to seventy years old had very little gray hair on her head. "What if he isn't the kind of man I like?"

"Then you will always have a home here. You come right back here land and leave him to himself. Or you can take yourself on a little adventure someplace else. But if that man is not what you bargained for, do not waste a moment of your time with him."

Jenny sat beside the woman in her wooden stall in silence for a few minutes. It was like her safe haven. Simms had always been able to sooth her spirits that way and right now her troubled mind needed some soothing. She wasn't going to tell the woman about the fact that it was her husband's brother who was coming in his place instead. No, that would just make her worry and so she kept that largely to herself. When she got up to leave an hour later, the rain had started to fall and the tiny drops that coated her felt jacket were like the teardrops of her soul. This was where she had been born, this Georgian town had been her home. Now, she was leaving it to head off to some place far less familiar and she had no idea what she would do if it didn't work out. She wasn't a negative person. She was just unsure... Her entire life she had lived with the safety of having her father around and under the protectiveness of her older brother. They had taught her how to defend herself, but she wasn't in fear of having to. She feared she would not be good enough for the man she was betrothed to. She could protect herself just fine, she was only in fear of going to a place where everything would be new to her.

Adam was a tall striking man with midnight blue eyes that seemed to captivate women who dared to stare into them. It was as if they just couldn't draw their attention away from him. Was that an issue? No, it was just a fact, and he couldn't understand why it was so difficult for him to speak to some women. It was as if they were entranced by his eyes and heard nothing he said when he spoke. All they seemed to be able to do was stare into the blue of his eyes.

"Did you hear what I said, Miss Jane?" he asked her with a raised eyebrow. If she said 'no' one more time he was going to burst a blood vessel and wind up being housed here along with the wounded veterans.

"Ah... yes, I think so Sir," the woman responded, now turning red in the face with the embarrassing fact that she had been caught yet again mesmerized by his presence. Adam could not get too upset with her. As a matter of fact, he simply refused to. He had grown up with this sort of attention. His own mother had been so mesmerized by him that she sometimes forgot what she was saying when she stared into the eyes of her son. My how she loved him so.

And he was beautiful. Most other men got called handsome, but with his blue eyes, skin made bronze from hours in the sun on his Texas ranch, and hair as black as the darkest hour just before dawn, he was referred to as beautiful quite often. His lean body from hours of raking hay and tending horses didn't make it any easier for him. And he was sure that if Miss Jane wasn't already married she would have been throwing herself at his feet.

He stood there in the crowded hallway of one of the second

largest buildings on his property as orderlies and nurses scurried around trying to give patients their medication, and tend to the new wounded soldiers who had been transferred in. The smell of blood in the air was as potent as the antiseptic they used to clean the place, and just as impossible to ignore as the faint moaning and occasional screams of the injured men wounded by the war.

“Miss Jane,” he began in an exasperated tone. “If I have to constantly tell you to do this one thing, I might have to find myself a replacement for your services.”

That snapped the woman right of her reverie as it likely would anyone. Jobs were hard to get and no one wanted to be out of work. It was a matter of survival these days, literally, and jobs were scarce as it was.

“No Sir, I got it,” the tiny woman with frizzy blonde hair said and excused herself to go about her duties. The source of his discontentment was the foul smell of blood that hung on the air.

“Giving the women hell again brother,” Lenard asked from behind him and he turned with a smile to look at his brother, for whom he had almost lost to the war. The one other man on the face of the earth he loved more than he loved himself, and the man he would give an arm or a leg for without hesitation. Miss Jane stood down the aisle looking at him but quickly averted her gaze from his brother. On any normal day that aversion would have seemed like coy flirting, but that was not the case today.

He hugged his baby brother who was just two years younger than he was and kissed his forehead. “Miss Jane is giving me hell not the other way around,” he lamented.

Lenard laughed as they walked into the warm Texas sunlight and towards the apple tree laden with fruit that stood just outside the makeshift medical center. Around them was a vast area of nothing but green, with penned up areas where the cattle and horses grazed, a barn for food storage and his big ranch house posted on a slope with a full view of every inch of his property.

“I am off to get your girl,” Lenard said and Adam smiled. He was so happy he had finally found a wife. She was thousands of miles away at the moment but he was happy that they would soon be formally introduced. All the Texan women he knew were too caught up with his physical attributes and he didn’t want to waste his time in courting a woman so frivolous, so he had taken almost six months getting to know his bride to be through letters, and he had fallen in love with the words she spun on paper for him.

“Take care of her for me,” he said to his brother concerning the long journey they were about to take. It would not be an easy pass and he didn’t want any harm to come to them.

“I will,” Lenard promised.

He looked at the scared face of his brother. Half burned and marred for life, while the other half of his face, clean and as smooth as a baby’s bottom. He had gotten caught up in a burning barracks and there was nothing the doctors could do about it. For Lenard it was simply a battle scar, and things like this taught Adam just how superficial the local women could be when it came to calling on a prospective bachelor. Where his eyes were blue, his brother’s had been a calming hazel, where his hair was jet black, his brother’s was a warming brown. Their stature commanded the attentions of many women over the years, but when Lenard came back from the war, they

began avoiding him. It was a thought that made Adam angry, but what was he to do? He could only hope his brother would find himself a wife soon.

A large carriage made its way from the main house to the road that ran alongside the apple tree under which they stood talking. After a long pause Lenard smiled and took a few steps away before turning around to look at his brother.

“Do you have anything else you would like me to give her when I meet her?”

Adam suddenly remembered the necklace her had bought. “Yes, this necklace.” He pulled it from his pocket and he knew he didn’t need to tell Lenard what it was for. He bid his brother farewell and watched him go. It would take him three weeks to get to Fort Worth and another three weeks back with the woman who was to be the Lady of the Ranch. He wished them God’s speed and said a prayer as his brother pulled away. In the back of the carriage was one of his maids, Emily. Sent to keep the woman who was to be her mistress some company. Three weeks on the road was not an easy thing and he wanted his wife to be to be very comfortable on her way here to her new home.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

* * *

Jenny had just endured the bumpiest coach ride she had ever had in the history of all coach rides. She was all but sure she would have bumps and bruises in places no womanly woman would care to explain, but the man who manned her coach was such a gentleman that she didn't want to worry him with her own personal problems.

"All the best Miss Jenny," he said to her, his skin as pasty as if he had not showered in ages, and his broken and rotten teeth she swore must be giving him grief. Yet he was the most pleasant man she had met in quite some time. Many people in the town turned their noses up at him, and she was beginning to think maybe it wasn't so much his appearance, but the fact that he needed a long shower, something she was inclined to tell him.

"Thank you Bob," she said to him. Another one of those she would miss while she sojourned through foreign lands.

She sat with her ankles crossed like the aristocratic woman she had been raised to be, and took a book from her satchel and delved into it to stop her mind from wandering all over the place. She couldn't help thinking about what life was going to be like and she was about to drive herself crazy thinking about it, so she read. She read about the romance of women less fortunate than her who had found love. She read about a woman named Caitlin and her far away lover who had gone into battle and had thankfully come back to her. She read the book about the life she wanted and prayed that her own kind of happiness would reveal itself to her on the other end of her trip. When her thoughts could still no longer, she took her small bible

from her suitcase and read a few passages from the book of Psalms.

It was nearly two hours later, while silently praying, that she heard a deep and soothing voice calling to her.

“Miss Martin?” the southern drawl was unmistakable even in the enunciation of her name and she was immediately taken by it. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes, knowing that the moment she did that her new life would start.

“Yes, that is me,” she responded as she gazed up at the tall, lean man who stood looking down at her with a smile. Her breathing stopped for a moment.

“Hi,” the man said. “I am Lenard. Adam’s younger brother and I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

He held out a hand which she willed herself to take, but not without hesitating, a reaction that made the light fade from the man’s eye. He was breathtakingly scarred and she had a kind of reaction she had never had before.

It wasn’t surprise, pity or even apprehension. Oh, no...it was not any of those things. This was a man who commanded her attention, and as she took his hand in the customary greeting, she could feel the calluses on them, much like her brother and her father had had. This was a man beautifully scarred by country and every line on his face told the story of where he had been and the things he had seen. But it wasn’t his face that pulled her in. It was his eyes. The windows to his soul were a mesmerizing hazel that whispered a calm straight to her core. She forgot her words for a moment. It was only when the young woman, dressed as a house maid stepped up to her that she was pulled

back to reality.

“I am Emily,” the woman said, extending a hand. “I am to be your maid.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you Emily,” Jenny said, forgetting to say the same to Lenard who assumed she had dismissed him. She watched as his eyes drooped and his jaw steeled themselves just before he picked up her two small suitcases and walked away.

Jenny was about to reach a hand out to him, but his long steps took him out of reach before she could. She looked at Emily questioningly, but the woman only lowered her gaze and waited for her to walk off before following close behind. This was going to be an interesting couple of weeks.

“Is he usually this surly?” she asked Emily in a whisper as they walked to the coach.

“No ma’am, I find him to be a gentleman with a good heart and a kind smile,” Emily said, looking worriedly at Lenard’s tall frame walking in front of them.

“So it’s just me he doesn’t like?” Jenny asked her.

“Actually my Lady, if I could speak frankly?”

Jenny stopped and looked her in the eye with a smile. “Always do, with me you will never have to ask that question.”

Emily smiled. “Well, I think he thinks you don’t like him.”

“Absurd!” she proclaimed a little too loudly, causing Lenard to

turn and look at them.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. And yet again she found herself lost in his eyes and unable to answer.

Emily came to her rescue as she just stared. “Yes Sir, we are just discussing the war.”

“You two have already delved into such deep conversation?” Lenard said with a smile. “I am happy you have found a connection.”

Jenny was still staring at him, willing her face to produce a smile, but the muscles simply would not work. She was truly stricken by the depth of the soul she could see in his eyes. Profound...

“And you did it again, my Lady,” Emily said with a sigh. “He really is a good man, if you could only find it in yourself to see past the scars.”

“No Emily,” she said in a whisper. “I think you both have gotten me a tad bit wrong. I do not see his scars. His eyes are gorgeous and they are simply hard to look away from.”

Emily looked at her as if she had gone mad.

“What?” Jenny asked wondering if she was breaking some unspoken code of some sort.

“Well,” Emily hesitated in her response. “That is something they usually say about his brother, your husband to be, and not really about him.”

“Then his brother must be as dashing and soulful as Lenard is,”

she said with a coy smile, now wanting more than anything else to meet the man who was to be hers.

Emily chuckled as she helped her into the carriage and Lenard took the seat up front. The interior was made of plush black velvet seats, big enough so that she could comfortably lay stretched out to sleep when she needed to. To one side was a small picnic basket that held bottles of wine and scotch and on the other side was what looked like a medicine cabinet. She could feel the vibration of the carriage rocking as her suitcases were loaded in the compartment on the front just before Lenard pushed his head in and spoke.

“We will be in the next town where we will stay the night in about seven hours. Get comfortable and help yourselves to the alcohol and sandwiches if you get hungry.

“Thank you,” Jenny said smiling at him and she could have sworn she saw him blush before withdrawing his head and going back to his duties. Emily exchanged a smile with her just as the carriage pulled away to start the journey to her new life.

* * *

Lenard sat in silence as he directed the horse through the narrow roadways, hailing the occasional passerby and generally just keeping to himself. He listened to the chatter of the women on the inside mostly because there was nothing else to listen to. He enjoyed the sound of Jenny's voice. It sounded hopeful. Most people either sounded exhausted, excited, happy, sad or some other completely visible emotion, but not her. She sounded like she had vigor for life that was a bit unnatural, and he heard no apprehension in her words about the life she was rushing off to. She spoke about the war with

Emily who answered in curt respectful tones, no doubt toeing the line and feeling her new mistress out. And as she spoke Lenard could hear a hint of emotion. It made him wonder if she had lost a lover or a friend to the war herself.

When their chatter ceased a few minutes later, he assumed they had fallen asleep and the next two hours of his drive was silent, save for the sounds of nature all around. He turned his thoughts inward and enjoyed the ride. It made him reminiscent of the early days of the war when he was just a sentry posted in the highlands as a messenger between posts. He had enjoyed it, but that was where the fond memories ended.

“Can I take a seat up her with you for a while?” Jenny’s voice sounded in his ear and he nearly jumped right out of his own skin. He had neither heard her moving about inside or the sound of the small door that separated them being opened.

“Ah, sure my lady,” he said. In afterthought he would have probably declined such a request, but she had near frightened him out of his skin.

I could use the cool breeze and a little fresh air,” she said with a smile. He slowed the horses so she wouldn’t topple off the edge and held the reins in one hand, while he offered her his other. When their skin touched for the first time, he felt an inexplicable jolt of electricity rush through him and he near pulled his hand away, save that if he had she would have found herself unceremoniously dumped on her derriere on the hard ground below.

When she was all settled she spoke. “I have never been away from home before.”

It was more of a statement as she turned her eyes up to the leafy foliage over their heads and took a deep breath.

“Really?” he asked, a little shocked. She spoke as if she were a woman who had travelled the land. Her prose was immaculate and the knowledge of many different things said she was a woman who had been educated outside the small Georgian town he had just collected her from.

“Yes, this is my first trip and I must say I love it so far.”

Lenard looked at her as she wore what was a permanent smile on her face and her dark eyes darted from this to that. She sat with poise the entire time she was there and he admired the way her elegant fingers kept resetting her dress that the wind would upset each time she did so. He wanted to speak to her but he found himself mesmerized by the way her wild red hair blew around her face and the curve of her lips as she smiled, revealing the whiteness below them. He couldn't see her eyes to know if the twinkle had reach them too, but he was almost sure it had. They were dark and a bit tormented, but he loved the way they wrinkled at the sides.

This was a woman his brother would most certainly love.

“Can I ask you something?” she brought his attention back to the present.

“Of course. I will try my best to answer,” he responded, directing the horses around a huge boulder, oddly protruding from the middle of the road.

“What is your brother like?” she asked him and for a moment he

was surprised. He thought she was going to ask him about his scar. He was both relieved and disappointed at the same time though he wasn't sure why.

“Well, he is quite the devil,” he responded with a laugh. He has a smashing character that makes me want to knock him over the head half the time, but even so he is one of the most honorable men I have ever known. And he is my best friend.”

He could see her soaking up his every word and he made sure to choose them wisely. It wasn't as if he felt he needed to walk on eggshells, but he knew for a fact that whatever he said now would form the basis of how she saw his brother and he didn't want to go spoiling that for her.

“And do you think he would make me a fine husband?”

It was a blatant question that was a bit forward, but he found it quite warranted given the situation and it was the first time he saw even a slight frown cross her face.

“You are worried that you may have left your home for a life that you are unsure about?” he asked.

“Worried is not quite the word. I am more curious and three weeks' worth of anxiety will surely kill me before I get the opportunity to have those questions answered.”

He chuckled at her proclamation. “He will make you a fine husband. He does love his ranch though and spends a lot of time with his horses, but a better husband you will surely never find.”

She smiled at him thankfully, and he could have sworn to himself that he'd heard her relax. For the next hour they rode in silence; her taking in the surroundings they passed through and him keeping a watchful and curious eye on her. His brother would be pleased with his choice, but not because she was so easy on the eyes. He would love her because there was something simply soulful about her.

* * *

CHAPTER 3

* * *

Her thoughts were the center of her attention now. It had been three days since they began their trip, and she had seen more than her fair share of happenings. She had seen a bar brawl, passed by a lovely forest wedding, spent some time by a lake and even managed to rescue a wounded bird on the side of the road. The bird who sat happily on her lap while its wounded wing healed up. She couldn't travel too far with it though, just in case it had a family close by that it did not want to be away from.

"We will spend the night here," Lenard said as he pushed his head through the open window a few minutes after the carriage had stopped. It was mid-afternoon, but the thunder overhead was promising some serious rains and the last thing they needed was to be bogged down in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a rainstorm. Looking up at the blackening skies, she soon agreed with his suggestion.

The building in front of them stood seven stories tall on the side of the valley road. It was of stunning architectural magnificence. As Emily walked to the side of the coach and picked up her suitcases, Jenny walked to the edge of the property to look at the rolling hills beyond it and the lush garden that lay off to the side.

"Gorgeous isn't it?" Lenard said coming up beside her and looking out over the valley below. "In autumn the trees become a kaleidoscope of colors I often paint from memory."

"You paint?" she asked sounding surprised.

“I find it rather therapeutic,” he responded and steered her away from the edge of the property as she felt the first drop of rain hit her hand.

She was more aware of his presence than she had been aware of with any other man before him. His presence was strong and undeniably comforting. She watched him as he would look away from her each time he caught her gazing at his face. He looked away in what seemed like shame and embarrassment, so she stopped gazing at him, unsure of how else to ease his shame. And each time he did it, she would turn to see Emily staring at her apologetically on his behalf.

“My Lady, are you alright?” Emily asked a few minutes later as they settled into the quarters that would be theirs for the night.

“He thinks I find him unattractive because of his scars doesn’t he?”

“My Lady?” Emily asked a bit thrown off by what was asked.

Jenny contemplated whether or not she should repeat herself and then decided she would. “Lenard, he refuses to hold my gaze and always turns his face away when I look at him.”

Emily smiled at her ruefully as she helped her to undo her dress. Jenny was not used to this kind of treatment but had warmed up to it over the last couple of days.

“Well, you can’t blame him,” Emily pointed out.

“I do not at all, I just want to know why he would assume I find him unattractive when I have never told him so,” she said a bit

distraught. "Did you know him before he was scarred?"

Emily nodded her head. "He was the gentleman then that he is today. He would come down to the kitchen quarters after work each day to help Old Mazy with the washing of the pans, much to his father's disliking. At the time I was just a girl starting out on the ranch. He always had a kind word and a smile for everyone and despite the fact that we were hired help, he never let us carry on without offering a hand when and where he could."

Jenny smiled, such men were rare creatures. "Has he changed since the war?"

"No!" Emily said with a hint of annoyance. "Lenard is the same, it is everybody else that has changed. All of a sudden they no longer see the man he is inside and it annoys me."

"He must be a close and dear friend of yours?" Jenny asked. That was really not what she wanted to know. She wanted to know if the man held a more intimate feeling for her.

Emily smiled at her knowingly. "No I wouldn't say that. He is just one of the very few men who still remember that money does not make them better than everybody else."

"Those people no longer exist," Jenny said, sadly looking at Emily who nodded in agreement. She was really beginning to like this maid.

"Women treat him as if he is ugly, so I am sure he means no harm, but when you find yourself being treated as an outcast for having fought for your country, it hardens you on the inside a little bit."

They spoke about life and its merits for hours, and Jenny felt like they would become really good friends. As they slept through the storm that raged outside, Jenny was awakened hours later by the sound of something falling with a reserved thud outside her door. It frightened her for a moment and she listened keenly to see if some sort of danger would follow.

She heard nothing but soft footsteps padding along on the floorboards. Weighing the idea of getting up to see who or what had caused the sound, she eventually pulled on her robe and slowly opened the door, taking care not to wake Emily while she was at it.

The cold wind from the open window on the stairs blasted her as soon as she stepped out and as she made her way to close it she was surprised the hallway wasn't flooded by then. She closed the window and heard a glass break in the saloon downstairs. By the feel of it, it was had to be a couple hours before dawn, and so it was highly unlikely the saloon was open. Her sense of danger was completely non-existent and so she went to check anyway, as if she were the proprietor of the place. Truth be told she just wouldn't have been able to go back to sleep and her curiosity was getting the better of her.

"Hello?" She called into the darkness and a candle light flickered close to the bar. There stood a familiar silhouette, helping himself to a bottle of bourbon.

"What are you doing up Jenny?" Lenard's voice asked her as she made her way over to him. "Go back to sleep you have a long ride ahead of you tomorrow."

"I heard something and thought I would see why it was," she answered quickly, ignoring his command."

They exchanged looks in the dead of the night and as the seconds tick by, a sudden realization flashed over his face, knowing that no amount of directing would get her back into her bed. Outside the thunder crashed around them as if voicing its anger and she pulled her warm robe tightly around herself. It wasn't the cold that she was feeling, for this structure was amazingly well insulated. What she was feeling was vulnerability beneath his gaze, but she didn't want to leave him alone as his eyes held a kind of sadness she had never seen before.

"What brings you to a bottle of bourbon at this hour?" She asked him hoping he would answer. Her father had always told her she needed to learn to temper her questions, and she wished she had remembered that just now as the look of complete annoyance flashed across his face.

"Sorry if I am prying," she said. He stared at her and she was about to walk away and leave him to his worries when he answered her.

"Most men who drink at this hour are usually drinking to a woman or trying to drink her off his mind. Either that or he has money worries."

Jenny chuckled as she sat on a bar stool a few seats away from him. "And you? Which of them is it?"

"None of the above," he said flatly with a smile. "I am simply drinking because."

"Is that a normal thing for you Lenard, or are you telling me a little fib?"

He looked at her and the candle light illuminated the twinkle in his eyes. "I am drinking to good fortune, and also because all this rain and thunder makes it impossible for a man to sleep."

She stared at him in shock. "I here tell this type of weather is the best kind for being wrapped up in a warm bed, and I must say the accommodations here are quite generous."

"It is indeed the best weather to be caught in bed with your love, but for me this weather is torture."

She laughed at his confession. "Then I guess it is a good thing we are heading back home to where she must certainly be waiting in you."

He looked at her questioningly and she got up to take a glass from the counter and poured herself a drink. She missed the days where she would drink and discuss life with her father and brother over a good bottle of scotch or an even better bottle of wine. Nostalgia struck deep and she could hardly hold it in.

"A woman who drinks bourbon," he said with a pleased smile.

"I am my father's child," she responded proudly. "Do women not drink in Texas?"

"You will find many things to be different about women in Texas. Mostly, they lack of hardened character, but I can see clearly that you have plenty of your own."

She thought about it for a moment. "Is that why your brother chose to find a wife from a thousand miles away?"

"Who knows why my brother does what he does?" He laughed. "But I would most certainly prefer a woman from outside Texas, if any woman ever found me attractive enough to wed."

Now they were getting to the meat of the matter and the look of pure sadness on his face made her want to wrap him in a hug and promise him the world would be a better place.

"Any woman who cannot see pass your scars that have only made you even more beautiful is not a woman worthy of your time or attention," she said to him before turning up her glass. "You are so much more than your physical attributes Lenard, and I for one am extremely happy to have met you."

She patted him on the shoulder and made her way back to her room. When she stood on the stairs he called to her.

"Jenny?"

She turned to him, only seeing his shadow from where she stood. "Yes?"

"Thank you," he said to her and she could hear tears in his words. He was a man broken by fire but she hoped he could see that he was something much more than that. She found the tiny strings of her heart strumming for him, but they didn't sing the tune of sympathy or regret. They were hopeful for him and happy to have known him. Somewhere deep down inside, she felt he would somehow become a significant part of her life.

CHAPTER 4

* * *

Lenard didn't leave the saloon until he had finished off the bottle of bourbon they shared and half way through the next. He wasn't so sure it was his sorrows he was drinking away anymore. Now it felt like he was trying to drink Jenny off his mind. She was a captivating woman, and for the first time in a long time he felt like someone saw him for who he really was.

It was close to noon the following day when he finally stirred from his drunken slumber to find Emily sitting in the corner of his room with a worried look on her face.

"What?" he asked bolting upright. "Is something wrong?"

"Ah, you tell me. Are you feeling okay?"

He looked at her confusingly, and then suddenly noticed the blinding sunlight coming through his window. "Yes, yes I am. We will be leaving in about an hour. Tell Jenny, please," he said and flopped back down in his bed.

"Sir, it is late afternoon. Are you saying we will be travelling by night?"

He bolted upright again and momentarily regretted it as his head swam and his stomach was about to upset itself. "You mean I have been asleep all day?"

"Well, Jenny said you nearly drank up half the bar, I was sitting

here to make sure you didn't go into an alcoholic coma or something of the sort."

"You are a wonderful friend, Emily," he said with a laugh.

She smiled back at him. "I will tell Jenny that we will travel tomorrow, and I will have some broth from the kitchen brought up for you."

"Thank you," he said and rolled back on his stomach intending to go to sleep. "Tell them to cook up the entire kitchen. I feel like I could eat a horse."

She chuckled and left his room moments later, but he could not go back to sleep. All he seemed to be able to think about was Jenny. He couldn't hide it anymore; he was smitten. He felt the need to drink that off his mind too, feeling like he had betrayed his brother in the worst possible way. To be smitten by the woman who was to be his wife was not something he considered very honorable. It was in fact quite the opposite. He groaned in his pillow and rolled himself out of bed intending to go see what else life had to offer him, but as he stepped out of his quarters minutes later, laughter was the first thing to greet him. Standing at the top of the stairs, there she was in a jet black dress that framed her body in the most couture of ways. But her physique was not what had caught his eye, it was the fact that she was slowly walking up the stairs helping an old man who could barely do it alone, and she did it with such grace and she wore a pleasant smile that said she would rather be no place else.

Yes, this woman had soul and it was slowly and surely pulling him in.

“Oh Lenard!” she called to him as she stepped on the landing and saw him there. “You are finally awake. How are you feeling?”

“He looks like he has seen better days,” the old man jibed at him and Jenny laughed at his clear discomfort.

“He has,” she confirmed and the two laughed at his expense again.

“I am happy you find such joys in my discomfort,” he said to them both, sarcastically.

The old man poked him in the mid-section with his cane. “Well son, if you are going to drink yourself to the bottom of the bottle, you need to learn to do it in style. This look doesn’t bring you the ladies.”

Jenny was beside herself with laughter. He smiled at her and retreated to his room. “I see you are in excellent company. I will go back to bed now.”

She pinched his cheeks before he closed his door. “Dinner will be ready in another two hours, so I guess I will see you then.”

It was neither a request nor a demand, it was simply a statement that said she expected him to show up and she would look forward to him doing so. He shook the stricken feeling he was having and took a moment to pray for guidance through it, while vowing to avoid her as much as possible over the next couple weeks they would spend together out on the road.

That in itself was going to be a task and a half.

Jenny ate her appetizer slowly, enjoying every bit of the gumbo soup with the luscious shrimp. It was the first time she had ever tried gumbo, and she liked it quite well. As good as the meal was though, she slowed her pace, buying herself some time. She was waiting for Lenard to decide to come out of his room and join them.

Ever the watchful one, Emily picked up on something amiss immediately. "Would you like me to go see if he is alright my lady?"

Jenny blushed at thinking how obvious she must be if Emily could read her thoughts so easily. She reminded herself yet again that he was not the one she had promised her hand to. She had told herself the night before that she was just being caring, but there was something about this scarred man that was speaking deep into her soul. She couldn't put her finger on it, nor did she quite understand it, but it was there.

"No," she said a little disheartened. "I guess he is just sleeping the alcohol off. If he doesn't come down by the time we are through then you should take him some soup."

Emily agreed and they got back to their meal. Jenny tried to distract herself with the chatter around the saloon. She listened to the rowdy men playing poker in the corner and sloshing alcohol as they carried on. She wondered how any of them were going to make it out of the saloon on their feet. Still they drank. A fiddler took to playing a few songs and the people who were not too inebriated to sing, nor too busy feeding their faces, hummed along to his tunes and she even found herself tapping her feet in time to the beat. But even then she still kept looking at the stairs, hoping Lenard would make an appearance. An hour later he still had not and so she told Emily to make sure he was fed, before making her way to the garden in the

back.

"Are you stalking me?" The old man she had helped a few hours earlier just sat there. "It is rather unbecoming of a woman whose husband is just up the stairs."

She smiled and sat beside him on the bench, as the warm afternoon sun caressed her face. The sunset splashed across the sky in a cascade of bright pink and orange, a testament to nature's artistic capabilities. She found herself wanting to share the moment with someone she loved and the fact that she was doing so with the old man whose name she did not even know, was beginning to depress her.

"He is not my husband," she admitted to the old man. "He is the brother of the man I am promised to."

He took her palm in his old and calloused hands, hardened by years of hard work. "The way he looks at you says he has already taken you as his own in his heart, so why fight it?"

Jenny was confused. Was he telling her to be disloyal or was he trying to tell her something far deeper than that.

"Sometimes we ignore the callings of our hearts for those of obligation, then get to my age and realize that you missed out on a spectacular part of your life. Don't make that mistake love."

With that the old man got up from his perch and headed back inside. She sat right there unmoving until the darkness began to swallow her up. When she entered the inn, she climbed the creaky old wooden stairs heading to bed, but that did not happen. His door was

ajar and she decided to take a peek in to see if he was alright.

She knocked on the door. "Lenard, are you alright." There was shuffling in the darkness of his room before his face appeared at the door.

"Yes ma'am," he answered flatly.

His eyes, when he came to stand in the passage, were cold. She could barely recognize him then.

"We missed you at dinner," she said.

He folded his arms and leaned against his door post. "I didn't much feel like company."

Jenny knew instantly what he wanted to say, but for whatever reason he was hesitating. She would make it easy for him.

"Did you prefer to be alone or just not in my company?"

"Both," he responded without skipping a beat.

She felt her heart ache and she would have simply walked away except that she couldn't accept his answer as long as she didn't understand why.

"Did I do something to upset you, Lenard?"

He looked her up and down and for a moment and she saw a flash of the man she had become rather fond of. "I simply think there needs to be a little space between us, people could start getting the wrong idea. Do enjoy your night. We leave at first light."

He did not wait for her to respond, he just stepped back into the shadows of his room closing the door behind him. She felt a bit of her joy slip through the cracks with his rejection of what she thought was friendship. She finally accepted it.

He was right after all. People could get the wrong idea of what was happening if she became too cozy with him, and despite the old man's ramblings, his brother was the one she was to be with.

"Okay Lenard," she said to his closed door. "I will leave you be."

Her footsteps were heavy as she dragged herself back to her quarters, thankful that Emily's watchful eye had already closed for the night. Come morning, she would ensure to give him some space, as hard as that would be for her to do.

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CHAPTER 5

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The next week of her life went by painstakingly slow. Lenard drove the carriage and said little more than was necessary to her, and though Emily tried her best to make her feel as if nothing was wrong, Jenny felt like a hole had opened up in her heart. She endured the cramped spaces of the carriage for hours when it became apparent that Lenard had no intentions of so much as holding a conversation about the weather unless it was absolutely necessary.

It wasn't until over a week later, after their exchange in the saloon below the inn, and half way through their trip that fate decided to stop making them strangers once again. It chose to do so by breaking a carriage wheel against a rock in the middle of the forest.

"We will be here for a while ladies," Lenard called as she felt the carriage jolt to a stop. "I will have to change out a wheel."

She came out intending to help, but he instantly turned away from her after a long fleeting look. Jenny was beginning to think that she was the one who had been rejected. She felt like all the scars he carried had suddenly marred her own beauty and he was finding her difficult to be around.

She took the time to take a walk to the edge of the woods where she heard a river raging its way through.

"You should talk to him," Emily said, coming to stand behind her. Jenny sighed and turned to look at the woman.

“Are you clairvoyant with the ability of reading people’s thoughts or seeing into the future or something?”

Emily raised an eyebrow at the question and she realized she sounded more harshly than she had intended. It was actually an honest question. “I meant no harm, Emily,” she said as the woman turned to walk away.

Jenny sighed and pulled her back to where they sat on the edge of the river looking down at Lenard, who was enjoying the solitude his work brought him.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked Emily.

The woman nodded. “Yes, it really is, my lady.”

“You don’t need to call me that Emily. I think we have passed that stage and any woman who can read my mind deserves to be my friend.”

Emily’s head shot up in surprise and a big smile crossed her face before she shook it off and went back to the matters at hand. “From the moment you both met there was a connection. I could see it. For whatever reason you have both decided to push each other aside, I would still suggest that you speak about it now rather than later. You will find that it becomes harder to clear those blurred lines once you are married.”

“I don’t know what to say to him,” she confessed, knowing full well that she needed to think of something.

“Just talk,” Emily said and drew her attention to where Lenard

was waving to them from the road. They hurried down the embankment to find his hand bloodied by a large gash and his face scrunched up in pain.

“You are hurt!” Jenny said, quickly opening the carriage for the medical kit inside. “We need to get that wound cleaned.”

“First we need to get this carriage up and running before nightfall.” He turned to Emily as if she was not standing there and again she felt like a cast away. How could one man she barely knew have the ability to make her feel like this so easily?

“Take one of the horses and ride to the next town. It’s about a twenty minute ride,” he said to Emily and she patiently waited for him to acknowledge her presence. “When you get there ask for Mr. Smith, and tell him that Lenard, Adam’s little brother requires his help to change a broken wheel. He will accompany you back.”

Lenard tried to unhitch one of the horses for her, but the gash in the middle of his hand would not allow him to.

“I have it,” Jenny said, helping Emily to unhitch the faster of the two horses and then get on her way. When they were alone the awkward silence was as thick as pudding in the open air.

“Let me clean your wound,” she told him with a sigh. “But first let’s wash it in the river to clean the blood away.”

“I am fine!” he said to her and walked away. Jenny was having none of that this time. She had grown tired of his insistence on treating her like she had done something wrong.

“No! You are not!” she said to him with such ferocity that he actually stopped in his tracks. “Your hand is bleeding and I can clean and sew that wound for you before it becomes infected, but if being an ingrate makes you feel better about yourself, then fine.”

She roughly dropped the kit back onto the floor of the carriage and stormed back to the river bank where she intended to wait until Emily got back with help. Hopefully that would be sooner rather than later. She took her shoes off and lifted her thin dress to wade into the shallow end of the river, deciding to sit on a stone and contemplate her life. The first thought she had was that if Lenard was to be a constant in her life even after she had married his brother then things needed to be worked out between them.

What things?

Well, that was not yet clear to her. She sighed and laid back on the stone, staring at the foliage over her head through which rays of defiant sunlight flickered to graze her skin. She played catch with the spots on the water that the sun hit while the cool water soothed her soul from where her feet lay.

“I am sorry,” she heard his words before she heard the tiny splashes his feet made in the water as he made his way to her. “It was never my intention to seem ungrateful and certainly never my intention to disrespect you.”

She lifted her head from the stone and looked to see him, regally presented to her in the afternoon sunlight, standing in the middle of the river with his pants rolled up to his knees and away from the water. She enjoyed the sight of him as he bent to wash the blood from his palm. She enjoyed his presence, and in that moment she knew that

what she was feeling for him was something she shouldn't, but how do you tell your heart not to love whomever it has chosen to feel the sentiment for?

"I would appreciate it if you would help with this," he held up his hand to show the nasty gash in the middle and held out the medicine kit to her with his other.

"Come here," she said to him softly, patting the space on the stone beside her.

He sat but not before tucking a rebellious strand of her red hair behind her ear. "I think I might have fallen for the one woman I am not meant for," he said to her, cupping her cheek and taking her breath with its warm embrace.

She looked in his eyes and felt nothing but sincerity in his words. Now, seeing the hesitation of a man who thought himself too broken to have those sentiments returned to him, she smiled a sorrowful smile. She slowly lifted her hand to the scared side of his face and traced his burdens with the delicate tips of her fingers.

"I think we've gotten ourselves into quite a bind, because I feel the same way you do."

It was a confession of her soul and one of the deepest kinds. For the next hour they sat in silence, while she sewed the wound in his hand closed and he played in her hair, ignoring the pain while she did what she could. When she was done he laid on the stone beside her, not touching or speaking, simply being there in the moment. Shortly before nightfall the sound of footsteps could be heard and she knew it was time for them to return to reality, with a heavy secret that would

consume them both, and they didn't dare do anything about it.

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CHAPTER 6

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For the next two days they bantered and chatted like children out exploring and enjoying a long adventure. Jenny took the reins and steered the horses along the course that would take them home and Lenard keeping a watchful eye on her skills teasing her about this and that as they went.

“What do we do about Adam?” She asked him later that evening when they stopped for the night.

His eyes clouded with pain the way it always did when she approached the subject. “I don’t know. I feel like I have betrayed him in one of the worse possible ways.”

Though it hurt her deep down when he said it, she also knew in fact that it was the truth. They both had committed an act of betrayal that would not soon be easy to pull themselves out of. They sat in silence for the rest of the evening, and with their mood sullied, she agreed to go to the street Jamboree with him and she danced away the feeling of hopelessness that consumed her. The sun was just setting and again she found herself admiring one of the most beautiful sunsets, but this time she was not alone. His presence beside her as they walked made her feel right at home as they made their way to where the music played in the streets for the gathering crowd.

The crowd was immense in the early evening, making Jenny wonder if people didn’t work for a living. There were men women and children of every age and size milling around and dancing to the beat of the songs being played by the band. The spirit was infectious and

for a moment she forgot that she was betraying Adam. They didn't stay in the streets though, that would have been too much jostling around. Lenard directed them towards a building that had been cordoned off to prevent people from entering at will. As they made their way to the stairs she grabbed a hold of Emily's hand and smiled at the young woman who had become her closest friend, and one who would someday make a lucky man an excellent wife. Emily had switched her maid garb out for a more fashionable dress and was fitting right in with the rest of the crowd milling around. The sign on the door said the place was open twenty-four hours, catering to the down and depressed, the procrastinators, the hoping to get lucky and the people like her who had no clue what her life was about or was going to become. They entered the saloon there to find it just as occupied but with a more chic crowd with women who were similarly dressed being spun and twirled on the dance floor.

“What are they celebrating?” she asked Lenard.

He shook his head. “These people don't need a reason to celebrate. Parties like this usually start off with someone striking up a tune and before you know it you are caught up in the atmosphere and enjoying yourself.”

Jenny liked the idea of that and seeing as this was a way stop along the route to the west, there were plenty of travelers who no doubt could use a break from the bumping and grinding of carriage wheels. She nudged Emily whose eyes were wandering in pure merriment. She was happy the girl was enjoying herself, she did deserve it.

“A shot for my lovely lady,” Lenard said drawing her attention back to the present. There were three and she handed one to Emily

who she knew was a light drinker and probably would not be able to drink much else after that. When Jenny downed the shot, the warmth of it made its way down her throat and almost immediately, it hit her like a brick.

“What was that?” she asked him.

He laughed and looked at Emily who was having a hard time swallowing it. “Absinthe, my brother’s favorite drink,” he told them above the music. She could feel her head getting light, but maybe that was his plan, to get her drunk and in the mood to behave inappropriately. If so, so be it, he was most definitely on his way. Though she knew him to be an honorable man and no such thing would happen. When he handed them a strong cocktail moments later, they sipped it sparingly and sat at the bar taking in the dancing that was happening all around them. He leaned against the bar watching her drink and she was just about to tell him to take her out on the dance floor when she was cut off at the knees.

“Hi,” a woman with hair way too blonde said stepping between them. Jenny had to physically stop herself from emptying her drink all over the woman, but what irked her was Lenard’s starry-eyed gaze.

“Hello,” he replied with a flirtatious smile that didn’t hide its meaning very well.

“Can I buy you a drink?” she asked him taking a step closer to him while swaying to the music. He looked at Jenny over the blonde woman’s head and she glared at him and just turned away. She didn’t hear what his response was but moments later the blonde walked away and he was drink-less.

“Quite the ladies’ man, aren’t you?” she said to him. But then she tried to keep herself in check because she was after all promised to another man. It was a constant reminder.

He smiled at her while he ordered himself another drink, but he gave no verbal response. Jenny kept quiet anyway, she had surprised herself with her reaction to him being flirted with. Now she knew more than ever that she needed to get away from him. In some other situation she might have had the right to feel the way she did, after all, he did proclaim to be smitten by her. How dare he be flirting with other women so soon after that though, and in her presence! She should just clobber him and walk away. But what did it matter, really? They weren’t together. She was just a passenger he had been told to carry safely to the waiting arms of his brother, so maybe she should let him carry on as if he had no feelings for her whatsoever.

Here she was, happy that his scarred face was not a deterrent to other women, and so she just tried to be happy for him. He certainly seemed to be enjoying himself, experiencing moments of joy and adoration in the eyes of other women. She really had no right to ruin this for him, and so she decided to hold her tongue.

“He is just enjoying himself,” Emily whispered to her over the drink she carried to her lips. Jenny had to agree and so she turned her gaze away from him and out the door where she had a clear view of the happenings in the street.

She sighed and allowed the music to distract her from yet another woman who had approached him. In addition to all of this, she felt she was being watched. It was a nagging undeniable feeling she had that she just could not shake. He handed her a second drink and she took it trying to pretend all was well, but the hairs on the back of her

neck stood on ends.

“Everything alright?” Lenard came up to her and asked.

She turned her eyes to the balcony above but saw nothing out of the ordinary. “I am not sure.”

“Come on Jenny!” he urged her. “Forget the world and let your hair down for a moment. Let’s go dance.”

There lies her problem. She couldn’t forget about the world. She was constantly worried about what her life would be when they finally arrived at Adam’s ranch. That was where her current thoughts were at in that moment.

Might as well have a dance, she reasoned with herself. She was just about to accept the hand he offered her to the dance floor, when another woman took it and pulled him away. He smiled at her and tried to pull her along with him, but the anger rising in her was just a bit too much. She tried to get a grip of her emotions but that was proving to be quite hard for her to do, so she downed her drink and stormed out of the bar. Emily, the ever loyal friend she had become, was hot on her heels as she made her way out into the early evening breeze.

She stalked through the streets with the rage of a woman scorned with Emily closely trailing her with every single step she took, and try as she might she could not escape her present emotions. She was not used to feeling like this and she most certainly did not like it. She couldn’t be feeling like this over some man she barely knew and even worse, she was to be his brother’s wife. Yes, there was that thought again, never leaving her for very long. No matter how sweet he was

and no matter how lovely it was to be in his presence, she had to stop herself or this man, scarred on the outside but lovely within, would no doubt leave her scarred and broken on the inside, and trying to hide all of her inward pain with her outward beauty. She was headed in the direction of her inn. For the moment, focusing on anything in her immediately surroundings was of the least importance to her. She felt like her head and her world would simply implode.

What was that? She asked herself, her red hair blowing behind her as she bobbed and weaved through the crowd. Fury colored her vision in one of the worst ways possibly and the serenity she had long since cultured as her default state of being was being pulled from her every cell by the piercing jealousy that surged through her. Never before had she ever felt so intensely about any man. Of all the suitors that had come and gone, he was the first to have gotten so deep under her skin and so closely to her heart.

She took a deep breath of the cool Mississippi night air. She found a spot on the outskirts of the dancing group, and watched while the dancers passed her by, before calmly walking with her hand in the crook of Emily's arm towards another saloon she had spotted. She was brought up to be a lady, but she found that women in these towns so far from her own were not opposed to joining their male counterparts in drinking and dancing every now and again. Whilst inebriation was most definitely not on her agenda, she had to admit that she really could use a drink. She glanced behind her to see if Lenard had pulled himself away from the suitors long enough to follow her, but what she saw was heartbreaking.

No sign of him anywhere.

She worried momentarily about whether he was okay or not, and

thought about going to back to find him, but the feeling that she had been pushed to the side for another woman was not endearing her to him in that very moment. She left him alone and Emily, usually rather chatty, kept silent as they walked towards the saloon up ahead. She wasn't sure as to where she should go in though. Maybe the inn wasn't such a good idea either, and so she walked passed it. Her strides took her to the edge of the local park and she quickly decided against venturing through it. She'd heard enough stories of what could happen when women took strolls through the park, and even though she was not alone, risking Emily's life was not something she wanted to do either, and having to run through the park at this hour...she was not interested in that right now, and so she stood at the edge of the park and stared up at the full moon overhead, and listened to the music that played from down the street.

“You love him?” Emily asked her intruding on her silent time; an intrusion she did not mind in the least.

She sighed and looked at her. “Can I trust you Emily?” she asked. It was not a question of the woman's character, it was a question of her loyalty.

“Yes, Jenny. I have never had a friend like you before and I hold that meaning close to my heart,” Emily responded with such conviction it was undeniable.

“I think I do,” she let go of the woman's hand and crossed the street in front of the inn. “Oh, what am I going to do?”

“Follow your heart,” Emily said taking her hands and holding her still. “Just follow your heart.”

“And break my word. That will not look good on my part,” she lamented.

Emily sighed. “I have seen time and time again where people choose logic and appearance over the urgings of their hearts and each time they all paid the price of unhappiness for it. Do not make that mistake. Adam is a reasonable man who loves his brother, and I suspect he will feel slighted by this, but he would be happy for his baby brother whom he thought would never find a woman to call his own after the scars of the war.

Steadying herself mentally she hugged Emily, not wanting to say anything more on the issue and made her way up the stairs and into the saloon. Opening the door she wasted no time in heading to the bar to try and work through the frustration of wanting a man that was not hers to want. But an hour later and even though he was out of her sight, he still weighed heavily on her mind. She made her way to the corner of the empty bar and ordered a shot before challenging Emily to a game of suicide chess.

“Not going to partake in all the festivities?” the bartender named Joe asked her. It was ironic that she had always heard about all of the festivities along the Mississippi River, and had even dreamed of coming out this way one day, and here she was right smack dab in the middle of it all.

She smiled at him, her words failing her. She was too upset. Everything about her day had been upsetting, but even more so what had happened with Lenard in the saloon. What bothered her even more was her reaction to it.

Jealousy???

She had never been jealous of a single soul in her whole entire life and she didn't want to start now. Besides, she barely knew the man, why would she? There was no explanation she could come up with that made any of it okay, and so she stuck to slapping the timer for every chess move she made, exacting her vengeance on the poor inanimate objects wishing with each play she could make better sense of her fluctuating emotions. But an hour and three shots later she was still no closer to understanding her own stupidity and had no idea what she should do. Emily's eyes were beginning to drop and Jenny felt guilty about having had her out this long. Jenny would tell her to go on up to bed if she felt she needed to.

She was spared the need to in a split second.

Jenny and Emily heard the crash before they saw what made the commotion and turned around to see what had caused it. Behind them at the bar, she saw a large man sliding down the wall where seconds before glass shelves had been stacked. He was knocked out cold. Her first instinct was to rush to him, but she stood frozen in her place when she saw the pair of suited men who stepped through the swinging doors of the saloon.

She knew they meant business and though her gut told her to get out she felt an irresistible urge to run to the giant of a man who lay there injured. It was her stupid emotional conscience, not being able to leave the innocent and wounded by the wayside, even if saving him would likely cost her, her life. She saw Joe, the bartender quickly spring into action, his hand coming up as he swung at the face of one of the suits. He was clearly outmatched and one of the extremely muscular men dressed in black swung one fist at him, causing him to crumble to the floor. He too was seemingly out cold.

“Get out!” he shouted to them but Jenny had no intentions of leaving him alone and Emily was far too shaken to move.

“Are these your women?” the man asked, his voice gruff and hoarse. “I might decide to take them as payment for your long overdue debts.”

“You will do no such thing!” she hollered at the man, not giving into his intentions. She was beside herself at the fact that she seemed to have chosen the only saloon in town where money matters between men were to be settled out in the open. Becoming a bargaining chip had not been on her agenda, and she knew that if she did nothing about it, she might not like where she and Emily would wind up.

“Ah such spirit,” the man drawled at her , taking a few steps across the hardwood floor, the chains he wore jingled threateningly with each step he took. “I just love a woman full of fire.”

For Jenny, he looked breathtakingly menacing and though she wanted to run to the other man, she ran instead to Joe to help him to his feet. He still lay in a heap on the floor from the punch that had sent him flying across the room. One of the suits swung at her face, making it clear that he wasn’t above hitting a woman and she fell beside Joe, whose aid she had come to.

Joe pulled at her arm shouting that they needed to leave and she could see the fear in his face as they made their way to the exit. She felt bad for leaving the men, but at least she could run and get help before things got worse. Fear froze Jenny in her tracks and Emily pulled on her arm. Just as quickly Jenny let out a scream, feeling the strong hold of a large hand around her arm. The hand of one of the suits.

“Run!” she screamed to Emily who wasted no time in doing just that.

Jenny was hopeless to prevent the strong arm that wrapped under her head and she knew if she fought he could easily snap it and she would be dead. Before her she saw the large man coming to and standing up. He started shouting and making his way toward her, but she could not clearly make out his words as the hand around her neck tightened and she began to slowly losing consciousness. One of the suits blocked the large stranger’s charge towards her and the bloody fist fight that followed made her want to scream.

“The more you run, the more people will pay because of you, Joe,” the suit who held her laughed in her ear, easing his grip on her throat just enough so she would remain conscious. He wanted her to see the beating the other suit was giving the man whose only crime was showing up to work and then trying to do his job for Joe, his boss. A tear slipped from her eye, with each blow the large man took from the suit. Then just like that the pressure from her neck was gone and she turned to see that Lenard swung at the man that was holding her. The blow caught him in the face and Jenny fell weak to her knees struggling to find her breath as she saw him fly across the room and slam into the wall.

“Hello again Joe,” a deep male voice said from behind her as she watched the heavy boots of a man pass her by. She tried to lift her head to see who was speaking but the pain in her neck prevented her from doing so. She could do nothing more than look up to see the deadly barrel of a loaded gun as it passed right in front of her face.

“We have to go,” Lenard whispered in her ear.

“We can’t leave Joe alone against them, she protested.

Lenard allowed her the moment to protest before answering. “This man’s name is Zeb, and he is a violent debt collector. If you stay he might hold you as payment and my brother will hang me in the towns square.” They looked up at the smug face belonging to Zeb who confidently popped a peanut from the bar into his mouth. As a burning sensation took over her body and Jenny thought he must be raving mad. There was no way Zeb was going to let them leave and they all now realized they had shown up unarmed and defenseless to what appeared to be a gun fight. Though arrogance often begets a downfall and she hoped that for once the stars would align themselves in her favor. Zeb thought himself invincible, maybe they could show him he was not.

“Oh no!” Zeb said as another man blocked the exit. “None of you are going anywhere until Joe here pays me what is owed.

“I don’t have it!” Joe shouted at him, looking around the room and evaluating his chance of escape. Zeb walked up to him and slammed a fist in his face before either of them could react and he crumbled to the ground once again. They were so distracted by Zeb and Joe that they had not seen the other man walk up to them. Jenny felt a sharp pain at the back of her skull just before darkness consumed her and she fell to the floor unconscious.

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CHAPTER 7

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Lenard's anger got the best of him seeing Jenny fall unconscious, so in retaliation he punched the man in the face, only to find the man's friend Zen, ready to fight as well. Almost instantly, Lenard saw Zen throw his own punch, barely missing Lenard as he stepped back and picked up a bottle of bourbon and smacking him across the head with it. While Zeb staggered backward cursing, Lenard righted himself and rushed over to Jenny where she laid unconscious from the blow she had received. The suits lunged at him but this time he was ready and slammed another bottle against one of their heads, moving out of the way of the blow thrown from the other. He charged at the other grabbing him around the neck and slamming him against the side of the counter. He was unconscious before he hit the ground and Lenard made his way to Jenny before Zeb could gather himself.

The suits didn't seem to worry Lenard much as he had dealt with their kind time and time again, and knew that they could be formidable but they would all eventually fall. Zeb on the other hand was a whole different story, and Lenard knew this maniac was not opposed to killing if he felt he needed to. He bent over Jenny and stared down at her as she finally came around.

"I am going to kill you!" Zeb shouted, and Lenard was sure he would, so Lenard hurried to get Jenny to her feet.

"Get up Jenny!" he urged her as Zeb aimed his double barrel shotgun and pulled the trigger. Lenard shifted out of the way just as the buckshot that would have blown his rear end to kingdom come found the wall behind him.

“Lenard?” Jenny said, trying to sort her confusion as she looked around the room. Lenard jumped up on the table and landed a solid kick to Zeb’s chest, sending the man back across the room.

“Run Jenny!” he shouted as he lunged at Zeb again from behind. Emily came to her rescue and helped her to her feet, but she was not going to leave him alone. Zeb nimbly side stepped his attack and backhanded Lenard, sending him flying towards her. He felt the blood flowing from his mouth as he slammed into the wall behind him.

“This man just cannot be put down!” Lenard screamed in frustration but Jenny didn’t move. “Go! I will find you!” He screamed at her once again but she didn’t move. Luck was on their side that day, as Zeb swung at him again Lenard ducked and fell to his knees, landing a solid punch directly to his crotch. Lenard himself could feel the pain as Zeb doubled over and then Lenard slammed Zeb’s head into the side of the bar counter. He was out cold and fell on top of his friend on the floor.

“He just never stops!” Lenard said, landing another kick to the stomach of the unconscious man out of sheer frustration.

“And trust me he will be back on his feet in a matter of seconds,” Jenny said nursing the bruise on her face. She knew men like Zeb who just loved to fight and cause trouble. He would never stay down. They needed to get away from him before he could do even more danger.

Lenard knew she was right as he had met men like Zeb before. “What is his deal, anyway?”

“He’s an ornery, ornery man,” she said and grabbed his hand as they began to run from the saloon to their inn with Emily on their

heels.

Huffing and puffing when they finally made it inside, they immediately started laughing at the strange looks everyone seemed to be giving the three of them. It was quite an adventure they would all agree, but it wasn't the sort of thing they liked getting involved in.

"Your face is bruised," Lenard said, reaching a hand out to touch her face. She shivered beneath his touch and smiled at him.

"I am fine," she said.

"Let's go home," he said and directed her up the stairs and to her room where Emily began to tend to the bruise on her forehead. "It will take a couple days to clear up but it makes you look like quite the warrior."

He smiled at the two of them and then left, headed out to round up a few men to see what they could do to help Joe who had been left to the mercy of his debt collector.

"What will I do Emily?" he heard her ask as tears of frustration made her voice shaky.

"Just follow your heart wherever it takes you and enjoy the ride along the way."

Lenard couldn't help himself but to smile at Emily's words. He really did like Emily and was happy she was along with him on this trip.

Three days later as they crossed into Texas territory, the bantering had diminished to silent whispers of their aching hearts, knowing that their time together was drawing to a close. In another three days she would be on the ranch that was to be her new home, and in the arms of another man, unless she had a sudden change of heart.

"You have been awfully silent all day," Lenard pointed out as she sat up front with him, looking into the fading sunset they were heading to.

She ran a soft palm over his forearm, exposed to the sunshine much like her heart was. "I have a lot on my mind."

"Shared burden is half a burden," he reminded her with a soft smile.

"Some burdens are better carried alone," she said placing a peck on his scarred cheek and feeling him breathe into her embrace. Her finger lingered along the lines of his scars that she had become so intimately familiar with. She was caressing them now, and he didn't pull away this time out of embarrassment. He leaned into her touch now, enjoying their time together.

"Promise me something," she said to him.

"Anything."

Was what she was about to ask of him too selfish? She didn't know and she wouldn't unless she actually asked.

"Regardless of what choice I make at the end of this journey, promise me you will always be a part of my life."

His shoulder dropped just the tiniest bit with the realization that she was in fact telling him she might not choose him. It was not that she didn't want to, her heart had already chosen him, but how could she betray the promise she had made to another man she had been quite fond of? Another man who by Lenard's own account was indeed an honorable and deserving man. How could she go back on that? What kind of woman would that make her?

"I will not promise you that, but I give you my word that I will try."

They fell silent and they both knew that for the time being, enough was already said. Something told her things were about to change and she just couldn't shake the feeling. An hour later she understood why her gut instincts had warned her of such a change.

The lanterns on the outside of the inn they were to spend the night were all lit and shining bright, and on the front steps stood a group of people seemingly awaiting the arrival of something or someone important.

"What's going on?" She asked Lenard a bit worried. Considering their experience in Mississippi, she was well within her rights to worry.

When a tall man stepped forward out of the group, Lenard smiled while he pulled his carriage around. It was a smile of happiness marred by the strange but potent hint of disappointment. "I believe you are about to meet the man you promised your hand to earlier than you think."

Just a moment later, before the carriage could even come to a

halt, Lenard hopped down from his seat and into the caring embrace of his older brother.

"Brother!" He said and hugged the man of his own height, with the bluest eyes she had ever seen, glowing in the dim light of the lanterns. She watched them hold on to each other like long lost friends and she felt the weight of guilt smash her like heavy waves, one right after the other. Theirs was a beautiful symmetry of brotherhood, and as she watched her dashing husband to be kiss his brother on the forehead, she knew her choice was made for her without the need for negotiation.

Lenard pulled him towards the carriage and he stood looking up at her with a look of pure happiness at finally meeting her acquaintance, and she looked down into his flawless face and instantly knew no other woman could possibly resist him. But what she felt for him paled in comparison to the feeling she felt the day she had met his brother, Lenard. As flawless and as honorable as she was sure his brother was, and whatever she was hoping to feel in his presence or hoping could cleanse her of her love for another man, just did not come.

"My Lady, meet your husband to be, my devil of a brother, Adam."

She smiled down at him from her perch and he held his hand out her.

"May I?" He asked like any gentleman would. She graciously accepted his offer and took his hand to make her way down.

"I am Adam and I have been dying to meet you."

Lenard smiled at her. "He's been dying to meet you so much so, that he left home and travelled three days to meet you here."

She tried to speak but couldn't. Instead she simply smiled and hoped they would assume she was simply tired from a day's travelling and overwhelmed by his presence.

"How has your trip been thus far?" He asked and she looked into his kind eyes and smiled.

"Interesting, eventful and perfectly tiring," she laughed.

"Yes, Jenny here got herself caught up in a debt collectors prerogative by mistake and suffered herself a blow to the head," Lenard interjected. "Luckily she doesn't seem to have gone crazy from it."

Adam didn't think it as amusing as they did and his jawbone clenched in anger. "Who is this debt collector? And are you sure you are okay?"

"His name is Zeb," Lenard answered as Emily walked pass them throwing her an apologetic look for the discomfort she knew her friend was suffering.

"I am okay though. I sported a battle bruise for a couple days, but Emily tended to it nicely."

He smiled again. "Yes, Emily is very good at that. You must be hungry and tired," he said to her.

"Hungry no, but extremely tired yes. I hope you don't mind if I turn in early tonight. We can get better acquainted in the morning."

"Yes! Yes! By all means," he agreed and escorted her up the stairs as she tried her very best not to look back at Lenard whose eyes she could feel were following her all the way up.

Adam gently kissed her forehead as he left her at her door. "I am happy you are finally here Jenny, and I look forward to what our lives will be like in the coming years."

She smiled and cupped his cheek before closing her door to the expectant gaze Emily had waiting for her. She turned and flopped down on the bed screaming into her pillow.

"I am doomed," she groaned moments later.

Emily laughed and patted her back. "No, you just managed to get yourself caught up in a rather elaborate chance at love."

She groaned again and buried her face into the pillow, wishing a raven would just come and whisk her away and back to a time before she had met them both. But even then she knew it would be hard to shake Lenard from her system. And therein was her biggest problem yet.

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CHAPTER 8

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The following day she was greeted with a smiling Emily shortly after dawn. Conversation was limited as she was caught up in getting her mind prepared for breakfast with Adam, and when she walked down the stairs she knew there was no way to avoid it. He sat waiting at a table in the corner of the saloon, with a happy smile crossing his face as soon as he saw her appear on the stairwell. She realized in the light of day how completely gorgeous he was and wondered why on earth would he have felt the need to source a bride from a million miles away. It was a question she intended to ask him.

Her eyes wandered around looking for Lenard, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Good morning my Lady,” Adam said, standing to help her with her chair as she approached.

Smiling, she prepared herself to carry on a light hearted conversation and greeted him with a good morning herself. At first the conversation was light. They talked and laughed about the many things she had seen on her journey and in particular at her ability to get Emily to take a drink.

“She must really trust you and enjoy your company, because we have tried for years to do the same thing to no avail,” he said laughing when Jenny made the remark about how the alcohol Emily drank seemed to get to her head rather quickly.

“I don’t know what the policies are at your ranch, but to me

Emily has proven herself to be far more than just a maid. She has been a constant companion throughout my trip and I hope you do not mind, but to me she will always be a close friend.”

He scrutinized her for a moment before responding. “I see what my brother was talking about,” he said, but the lack of a smile or even the glint of amusement made her wonder if she had crossed a line she shouldn’t have.

“I hope I haven’t offended you,” she said to him, praying she had not.

“No. Lenard said you were full of soul and he thought my choice of a wife was excellent,” he responded with a smile, but a pensive one.

“You sound as though you and your brother shared a few drinks last night,” she said, not so sure she liked the idea of having been the subject of discussion when she wasn’t around. But then it was only fair that they had the opportunity. She herself had asked Lenard and Emily to tell her about this blue-eyed man she was to call her own.

He laughed at her statement, the corner of his eyes wrinkling with it. “If that were the case my lady, I can assure you that you were spoke of very highly, and I plan to honor every day that the good Lord gives me with you.”

She smiled, warmed by his proclamation and seeing nothing but its truth in his eyes, and again, here came the guilt rolling over her like those annoying indelible waves of life, pushing her to focus on her reality and the fact that as handsome and charming as this man might be, he did not speak to her heart the way his younger brother did. She had seen beyond his scars to the soul inside him and she had found a

companion like no other there. She might choose to go ahead with this alliance with his brother, for fear that the truth might tear them all apart. She knew deep down though, that he would never have her heart the way Lenard did. It was a fact that made her sad, and even though she spent the rest of her day in Adam's company arguing politics, talking about the war, literature and even gardening which he promised to teach her, she longed for the man she could sense watching her, but had denied her the sight of seeing him all day. Lenard.

With sunset she hoped he would at least stop by to say hello, but even that was denied to her. When they left the following day, Lenard was nowhere to be seen, nor was he with them on their three day journey to the ranch. He seemed to have simply upped and disappeared.

"You will see him again," Emily said to her shortly before she arrived at her new home.

"I am beginning to wonder if his absence is not for the best."

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CHAPTER 9

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For the next two days she feigned being too ill to make an appearance outside and having spiked a fever she had the perfect excuse. She stayed laid up in bed contemplating the merits of life and whether she was cursed or simply stupid.

I should have known better, she said to herself, but hot on the heels of that reprimand came the fact that she did not know how to tell her heart to not get involved. She didn't know much of her mother, but when her father had spoken about the woman who died giving birth to her, he had often said he did not choose her it was his heart that did.

A warming fact and one she never really understood until now. If only he was still alive to give her a bit of guidance. But a knock sounding on her door relieved her of the need to think much further.

"Who is it?" she asked

There was an anticipated silence before the voice she had been hoping to hear spoke up. "Its Lenard," he said and her heart sang songs of pure gratitude. She was so happy she nearly toppled over herself trying to get to the door.

"Are you okay?" she asked, embracing him without thought and realizing a little too late that Adam stood not far behind him. Whilst she tried to temper her smile, she knew the joy in her eyes could not be hidden. "I asked Adam yesterday if you had been dragged off somewhere by wolves."

He laughed and Adam hesitantly stepped between the two to give her a peck on the cheek. “See if you can get her to take a walk for me brother,” he said before walking away. “All my attempts have proven futile.”

To Lenard she knew that might have simply sounded like a brotherly request, but she did not miss the subliminal hint of curiosity in his tone. She would not take a walk outside, for fear she might become her own whistleblower, but she would take a walk around the house as she could not very well entertain him in her room.

“Walk with me,” he asked as if on cue.

She sighed. “I am afraid I am not yet up to the great outdoors, but I will take a walk with you around the house, as my legs could use it.”

He offered her the crook of his arm for support and she took it. The electricity that passed between them both was more than either could again deny, but she knew better than to give in to its call.

“Be careful Lenard, least your brother picks up on our betrayal.”

He took a deep breath as he had done often enough over the last few weeks, a signal for her to know that nothing good would follow. “That is exactly why I came to speak to you. I think we should tell him.”

That stopped her in her tracks, and she had to wonder if she was hearing properly. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me,” he said flatly and tightened his hold on her hand so she couldn’t pull it away and run back inside.

“I don’t think so.”

He looked at her as if she had just broken his heart into a million tiny pieces. “Are you trying to tell me that you do not care for me enough to tell him the truth and give us a fair chance?”

She was a bit angry at his sense of entitlement. “You disappear for days and just show back up here without any explanation and expect me to upset the balance of things on a whim?”

He turned to her as if contemplating something, and the anger in his face was clear, but then he took a deep breath and resumed their walk around the top floor. “I went away because I needed space to think and I was certain I could not have thought too clearly having to see you every day.”

“And you don’t think I would have wanted that luxury too?”

“I went away to give you the same breathing room. Clearly it did not serve the same purpose for you.”

She sighed, not wanting to fight with him. She had missed him way too much. “I could not have concentrated on anything long enough because of fear that your sudden disappearance meant that I would not see you again. What you gave me was not space, it was worry. I nearly worried myself into my death bed.”

“I am sorry,” he said turning to her. “I am sorry, but now I am back and I am begging you for a chance to give us a shot.”

She looked at him, seeing passed the demand for something she could not give him. She looked into his hazel eyes and deep into his

soul to the brokenness made whole by the weeks they had spent together. She looked at him and saw a lifetime friend she had made, and knew that she would have to break his heart all over again.

“I can’t,” she said finally. He looked as though he would run away with the tears welling up in his eyes. “When you didn’t come back I agreed to marry your brother. I like him a lot and I think I will learn to love him with time. Besides it is the right thing to do.”

She took his hand and made the round again, only this time when she got back to her door he let her go. “I will be leaving for a while after the wedding, and I will not come back until my heart has moved passed you.”

Jenny watched him walk away, reluctant to accept the fact that she would only have him for another week, and she knew he would be very distant during that time. She understood that he was likely wanting to run away now, but he would not, because despite what he felt for his brother’s wife, she knew him to be a man who would give anything for his brother. He was a true gem and she hoped one day he would find a woman worthy of him. She closed her door and cried herself to sleep. For the first time in a very long time, she knew what it was to have her heart broken beyond repair.

* * *

Lenard could not put distance between himself and his brother’s ranch fast enough, but he slowed his steps and smiled at everyone he passed, hoping they would see beyond the façade he had put up to protect her and her secret. He had laid his soul bare to her and she had chosen someone else. He was beyond words and numb to the point he did not even remember saddling his favorite horse and riding

through the woods. He only remembered hearing the singing and happening upon Emily, busy collecting wild berries. She slowed at the sound of his horse hooves approaching and gave him a big smile.

“You are back!” she said gleefully and hugged him. His heart warmed as it always did with her, she had been like the little sister he had always wanted but never had.

“I will stay for the wedding and then I am leaving for a spell,” he said.

She sighed as he took the load of her small basket. “So it is true. She will be going ahead with it?”

He didn’t answer her question, but instead kicked a stone clear across the small clearing and into the stream that ran by. This had been his childhood home and the place he had yearned for when he was younger. Now, it was the place that held the broken veterans together and the place that the woman he loved would live on without him. In a few years he was sure it would be the place he’d die, but then again he felt like his soul had already done that.

“Is it because of my face?” he asked angrily.

Emily placed a hand on his cheek and then pulled him down for a hug. “You know that is not the reason why. And despite what she told you, she made this sacrifice for you.”

He stepped away from her as if she had gone mad. “How is breaking my heart something she did to help me?”

Emily smiled. “You men can be so hopelessly naïve sometimes.”

He followed her to the stream helping her as she waded in and washed the berries with the cool running water and then popped a few in her mouth. He waited with waning patience for her to tell him what she was carrying on about, and the more he stood there waiting for her answer the wider her grin got. She was like the sister he had always longed for and she was playing that role perfectly just then.

“Well, out with it!” he demanded.

She handed him the basket of berries and sat on the edge of the stream. Her bare feet disrupting the flow of water like Jenny had disrupted his peace of mind.

“Have you ever stopped to think of what would come of the bond between you and your brother if she ever told him that she had fallen in love with you? Do you know how hurt you would be if he reacted angrily with you and how long it would take to mend that bridge?”

He stopped talking and sat beside her. He hadn't thought of that. Like an arrogant old fool he had not thought of that at all. He was so used to his brother being by his side through thick and thin that he had not once thought there was a situation under which that could change.

“She chose heartache to protect me,” he said with a heavy sigh. “But I didn't ask her to.”

“She loves you Lenard, and when a woman loves you there is often no need to ask her to make sacrifices on your behave. She simply makes them because she loves you.”

“What do I do now?” he asked, well aware that he was asking a

woman who had very little experience with these things, outside of the fact that she was a woman.

“You honor her sacrifice, but whatever you do, do not disappear from her life unless it is absolutely necessary.”

They sat there in silence listening to the breeze blow through the trees around them. In the distance behind them, they could hear a cow calling to its family and the sheep dog they had for rounding up the goats yipped happily at something. His heart was broken into a million pieces knowing he had hurt the woman he loved unnecessarily, and he was at a loss as to how to make up for that. He simply knew that he had to.

“Do you think we will ever be friends?” he asked.

“I hope you will. You both have too much love for each other for it to be otherwise, and yours is a bond forged beyond factors of a physical nature, and you shouldn’t let your egos get in the way of that. They watered their horses and walked them back to the ranch, passing the medical house where veterans who were well enough to walk came out to enjoy the evening sun. It reminded him of when he had come back home just after the war, and he pitied those men who were now experiencing what he had. He made a vow to work there in the days to come, maybe take the responsibility off his brother’s shoulders.

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CHAPTER 10

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The night before her wedding she could not sleep. Jenny made her way to the stash of alcohol in the parlor and when that did not work she made her way across the lawns to the medical house to see if she could be of use while she waited for daylight to come and her hand to be given away in marriage. She was both excited and afraid. Having taken the task of having her hair and nails properly taken care of, and met with a few of the town's elite that she would soon be rubbing shoulders with and throw balls and dinners for. Hers was a post of diplomatic importance, in a town ran by the families with the most money. It was all so standard around these parts and she had to admit she was looking forward to it.

"My Lady, what are you doing out this late?" Emily asked her as she entered the house to the coughs and barely audible moan of the men around her.

"I cannot sleep," she said apologetically, "so please put me to work."

"Wedding jitters?" one of the nurses asked her. She nodded and hung her head low, maybe she wasn't supposed to have those. "We all got them at one point or the other. Giving yourself away is neither a simple nor an easy task."

She breathed in relief, and sat on one of the spare beds. "I will have dark circles under my eyes and look like a reluctant old hag on my wedding day, won't I?"

The soldier closest to her laughed. "Take a walk out in the cool night air, it will calm you right down. I find when life gets me to the point of insanity, a long walk always does the trick."

She would have taken him up on his offer except she was afraid to walk around in the dark alone and she did not care to wake her soon to be husband while he slept in eager anticipation of starting anew life tomorrow.

"Just give me something to do," she begged them, and the matron did put her to work. She gave her bed linen to change and taught her to bandage wounds, arrange the medication for the following days and read to some of the men who were awake, though had troubled vision. By the time she was done she was more relaxed than she had been in a long time and the sun was coming up.

"I thought I heard you were in here," Adam said to her as she was finishing up the last round of tasks she had been given. He pulled her in for a hug and placed a kiss on her forehead. "You have not slept all night."

"No," she smiled up at him resting her forehead against his lips, "but I think I found my calling."

They turned together and looked back at the men and she knew that this would be what she would do after she was married, but for now she was finally exhausted enough to sleep. Adam walked her back to her room and kissed the top of her hand.

"I want you to know that I am forever grateful that you have come into our lives and I would have it no other way. Come what may."

She smiled at him not missing out on how cryptic the last part of his message was, but nodded anyway. She was much too tired to delve any deeper and not even the enchanting smell of breakfast could bring her to fight sleep for even a moment longer.

It was near seven hours later when she was gently stirred by Emily that it was time to get ready for what was to be the biggest day of her life. The nervous jitters returned but the sleep ensured that the night's paranoia did not. She took her time getting ready, bathing in water flavored with rose scented petals. After which she was powdered from head to toe and massaged to the point of being pliable beneath Emily's hands. Amidst the chatter of what her married life would be like and what her babies would look like she tried to resist the urge to ask for Lenard. An hour later when she donned her gown and took a twirl in the mirror she wished her brother and father were around to see her on this important day.

She peered out her window at the area beneath the big oak tree where her wedding was to take place and saw the people filing in and taking their seats. Adam had asked her what kind of wedding she had wanted and she told him exactly what she wanted. For as long as she could remember, she had always dreamed of a small and intimate wedding with no one but the people who mattered there, to share in the experience of how beautiful it would be. He had given her just that,

"Are you ready?" Emily said after putting a purple hibiscus behind her ear to highlight her cheekbones. She nodded. She was about as ready as she was ever going to be, and as if on cue the music outside picked up and carried its way to her bedroom.

"Do you think I am making the right choice?" she asked Emily

who simply smiled at her.

* * *

Lenard stood beside his brother as his best man, a mockery to the position, simply wanting the day to be over with. They had both dreamed of this time for years, but it was not as it should have been. When his eyes caught the woman in white walking down the aisle she stole his heart all over again and everything blurred into nothingness. Everything except her frame hugged perfectly by the white dress she wore and the nervous smile that spoke of her fears. He saw her. He saw every bit of her, the seen and unseen, but when she stepped up to his brother and looked him in the eye; he knew that what he wanted was now lost forever.

Much of the initial service was something he would try to forget, and when the pastor said, "If you object the union of this man and woman in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace." He felt like he should speak up, but said nothing.

Seconds ticked by and they waited, then Adam spoke up.

"I object this union," he said, and a gasp ran through the wedding crowd and an outcry of blasphemy was soon to follow.

"Adam, what are you doing?!" he asked his brother who only smiled at him, while a tear escaped Jenny's eyes. He wanted to scoop her up and hide her away until this was all over, but he knew he couldn't.

"No brother, Adam said and took his hand pulling him forward before addressing the gathering. "For years I have been my brother's

fighter and his protector, and for years I have watched him live the life of a happy man. That was until he came back from the war. Disfigured in the service of his country, most of you today now turn your eyes away when he walks the road, as if somehow the fire had claimed his identity. Shame on you.”

Lenard held his breath not sure where his speech was going, until Adam pulled him in for a hug and kissed his forehead.

“Then I see the way my dear Jenny looks at him. She sees nothing of the man on the outside and instead sees the man he is on the inside, and I will forever love you for that.” He turned to Jenny as he said the last bit.

“Adam stop!” Lenard urged him.

“Today, I object this wedding, because I have seen love blossom between these two people who I hold dearest to my heart, and I have seen them love each other beyond imperfections, so I ask myself why should I marry Jenny out of obligation, and why should I expect her to do the same?”

Adam picked her hand up and placed it in Lenard’s who stared at him in speechless surprise.

“I love my brother and I want him to be happy, so today I say to them both. This wedding is for you and you have my blessing. I love you both and I will not take you from each other out of obligation and spite. Be happy and fill this ranch with laughter and children, until I find a wife of my own to add to the abundance.”

He kissed Jenny’s forehead and wiped away the tears of joy that

flowed down her face. A cheering went through the crowd and when they quieted, Adam took Lenard's place as the best man, and a story of happy ever after would begin.

* * *

EPILOGUE

* * *

A year later

“I am carrying our first child,” Jenny whispered to Lenard that night as he lay exhausted in their bed. He jumped right up to look her in the eyes, then pulled her to her feet and twirled her in pure graceful happiness.

“Wait, are you playing another one of your jokes on me?” he asked her as the rain tore at their window panes.

She shoved him away in mocked surprise and walked away. “That would have been cruel of me.”

“Well you do have a mean streak,” he said in his own defense.

“Keep that up and you will be sleeping outside with the crickets,” she warned him as she crawled back into bed.

He snuggled up to her and kissed her on the cheek. “I am happy about this. Are you?” he asked and she could hear the worry in his voice.

“She turned in his arms and pecked him on the lips. “Beyond words.”

For minutes they laid there in silence with his hand resting on her stomach, whispering silent words of joy to his unborn child. “Emily will be happy,” he said.

She chuckled. “We will have to fight her for time with our own child.”

He laughed at that. Never before had they both had such an exceptional friendship like they found in his brother. “Do you think she will marry soon?” he asked her.

“I hope so,” Jenny said. “She deserves every bit of happiness she can get.”

* * *

Emily sat in the darkness thinking about what her life would amount to. She wanted more, she wanted to see more of this country she lived in, but she knew she wasn’t going to be able to do so being a maid. Though this was home, she felt it was time for her to leave the safety net she had clung to and go see more of what the world had to offer. Maybe if she was lucky she would meet a man like Jenny had and he would whisk her away to some place far away. She had to try. Life was not stifling, but Lenard was okay and Adam would be too. They had been the only reason she stayed around as long as she had, so now it was time for her to branch out on her own.

Mail Order Bride? She thought about it. She had been thinking about it, and now she would see what it had to offer her. Come morning she would try her luck.

* * *

THE END

BRIDES OF HOPE & DESTINY

2

RESERVED BRIDE FOR HER BROKEN HEIR

PROLOGUE

* * *

1901 Texas

“Must you go?” Jenny asked her, walking softly into her bedroom where she was busy packing for the long ride ahead of her. Emma turned to her with tear filled eyes. She had always wanted adventure and was desperate for a change. She found that the huge Texas ranch was becoming a little too much the usual for her and she craved something more than just being a maid. She wanted to be more than that. She wanted a family of her own, a home of her own and a husband to call her own. Sadly, the fact that she had been a maid for so long in Texas meant that the men she had set her sights on didn’t see her as anything more than a servant and she desperately wanted more for herself.

She turned to the woman who had become her best friend. Jenny had been everything she had ever wanted in a sister, a friend and a mistress. And the tiny drooling child she now carried on her hip was the apple of all their eyes.

“I must,” she said sadly, trying to control the tears that threatened to moisten her cheeks. She waved the last letter she had received from an Aunt in Minnesota asking if she could come to the cool hills to help her with taking care of her business since she was ailing and in bad health. It had not been an easy decision for her to leave the gorgeous Collard brothers and Jenny, for whom she thought of as family. It had been anything but easy, but then again her life had never been easy. She tried her best to keep it together.

“Well, you know that if it doesn’t work out you will always have a home and a family here,” Jenny said to her.

“I know,” Emily took the baby from her arms. She had been there for little Jake’s birth and would have stayed to see him grow into the fine young man he would surely grow to be, but she also knew that at some point, she had to stop living her life vicariously through others. She had to learn that sucking whatever happiness she could from the others around her was not true happiness. She could be happy for the people she loved and she truly was, but she needed to feel that joy first hand.

“You must visit,” Jenny said. “I know the trip will be a long one each time, but I would love for you to take a break once per year and come visit. Don’t just run away from us.”

“Run away?” she laughed. “I couldn’t even if I tried.”

Emily placed Jake on her bed and went back to packing as Jenny worked in total silence. They passed the occasional smile at each other sharing in the bittersweet moment that was to become her departure, and when they were done, they took a walk through the late summer orchards, talking about life as it would become and what more Emily hoped for.

“If you find a man you plan to marry, you cannot do so without inviting me to the wedding. Promise me!” Jenny demanded.

She laughed again. She would miss this Georgian woman who had travelled three weeks and fallen in love with the brother of the man she was intended to marry. She would miss her because she had become the sister she never had... she would miss her because with

her things had been easy. Again the tears matted her eyes and she shoved them away. Fortune favored the brave and in a time where women like her would set out on journeys across foreign lands, tears were a sign of longing, and that was a weakness she could not afford.

“I wouldn’t dare walk down the aisle without you there Jenny,” she said and meant every word.

“What do you think your Aunt will be like?” Jenny asked as they walked by a low hanging apple branch and picked two apples to munch on. Behind them on the balcony Lenard, Jenny’s husband, stood with little Jake looking out at the women strolling. He was a man physically scarred by war, but he had never stopped being the loving man he had always been.

“I hope she isn’t an old hag,” Emily said laughing. Before her mother had died there was so few kind words ever said about her Aunt Josy, but she was hoping that in sickness the woman had found some semblance of humanity, enough to make her amiable.

“Well, if she is you come right back home.” Jenny said and Emily didn’t need to be told twice. Nevertheless, she still wanted to see what else the world had to offer her.

Jenny pulled her in for a hug and she allowed herself to be swallowed up by it. Come morning it would be the last one she got for a while and she really didn’t want to forget what it felt like to be hugged by a sister.

“You make sure little Jake knows how much I love him,” she whispered into Jenny’s neck.

“I will,” Jenny assured her.

The breeze picked up around them as they walked hand in hand back to the ranch house that stood in the middle of the property. Behind them the rush of the river could be heard as it tried to overflow its banks from the torrential rain fall just days before. The small barn that had been turned to a medical house to hold wounded veterans from the war was bustling with activity, and later in the evening the men who could walk would take a trip outside singing war songs that would echo around the property. The smell of food being cooked in the kitchen was soothing to her senses and she knew that no matter where she went, this would always be home and she would miss it terribly.

Her Mama used to always tell her that some good things always came to an end and it was something she had come to accept. Change was inevitable and you would never know if better was out there unless you went out and saw what the world had to offer you first hand.

This was a time for her to shake off her safety blanket and go on an adventure.

* * *

CHAPTER 1

* * *

1901 Minnesota

Martin stood on the hill overlooking his home and smiled. It had been five years since he had left his small Minnesota town for the war, and he had never thought he would have made it back alive. To be frank, he had all but prepared himself to come home in a body bag or a pine box. His fiancé would have been the one to be handed the flag that would have been used to cover the box he arrived in. And the theatrical sounds of sixty-one guns would have rung out loudly as he was lowered into the ground.

“Home sweet home,” he whispered on the cold winds that whipped around him. Oh how he had missed being here. He had missed everything about being home, everything including the cold winters and early autumn winds that had always cut his summers short. He had missed it all.

With glee in abundance, he slowly skipped his way down the hillside and to the sprawling mansion that had been his family home. As an only child he had inherited it, but unsure carrying on his family’s legacy was what he had wanted to do for the rest of his life, he had opted to go off to war. The family’s caretaker, Forrest, had been the one left in charge of it all and by the looks of things as he walked onto the compound; he had done a fine job.

His father had died the year he had gone off to war, and it had been the catalyst for his decision, but that wasn’t the only thing that had made him leave this place behind. His mother’s refusal to accept

the woman he loved had also been a motivating factor. Now five years later she had sent him a letter begging his forgiveness, stating that she had remarried and moved south and she wanted nothing more than for him to be happy. It had been a burden lifted from his shoulders in a time when parental approval was necessary for almost everything.

“Martin!” An overjoyed Forrest flung the front door of the house open and rushed out to him. The older man who walked with a limp covered ground much faster than Martin would have thought possible and the impact from the hug of this burly figure nearly knocked him on his rump as he dropped his duffel bag and embraced him with the kind of love that only family could share. His family had been many things, from cantankerous to deceitful and even downright filthy, but the one bond that had held them together all these years was the fact that they valued loyalty. They valued every single bit of it and Forrest had been heavily rewarded for his. This was a man who had been a friend, brother and a father to him and Martin could have been no happier than he was now at seeing him.

“I woke this morning and felt I was in for a change! For a grand surprise!” Forrest said with happy laughs punctuating his every word. “I woke this morning and I felt in my bones that I would be in for some wonderful news and here you are!”

Martin laughed and pulled him in for a hug. “I am happy to see you too Forrest. I have never been happier.”

“Welcome home Sir,” the man who had been his butler for years answered quickly with genuine respect. Martin would have told him that he needed not call him *Sir*, but he knew it would do no good. He had been telling the man that ever since he was a child and here he was, twenty-nine years later still doing the same thing.

“How have you been?” he asked him as they walked into the foyer of the mansion and the familiar scents of family and home assaulted his nostrils. He smelled the lavender incense his mother always burned filling the house, and the paintings decorating the walls were the same. An old woman who was supposed to be his grandmother smiling down at him from the entrance, and as always he wondered what it would have been like to know her. His father had been a gentle soul, but a conniving one, he had always wondered if those were mannerisms his father somehow picked up from his grandmother.

Maybe... maybe not, and he would never know for sure given that they were both dead.

“I have been good,” Forrest answered back, smiling. “The last couple of winters were horrible and I suspect this one will be just as cold but it has been wonderful.”

“And the estate?” he asked taking on a serious tone as he queried his finances. He wasn’t a superficial man, but he would honor his father’s legacy.

“It has grown,” Forrest said with a smile. “We have procured more lands to the east and we have bought a couple of the local businesses that were suffering and built them up. I have done as best as I could and I hope you will be pleased,” the man said and Martin could see he was searching for some sort of approval.

“I am sure I will be,” he said. “Have you married yet, Forrest?” he asked with a smile.

The man, whose neat sideburns were greying just the smallest bit,

blushed in the most vulnerable of ways. “Someone did come along about a year after you left, but she could not understand my dedication to this estate and so it did not work out for us.”

“Your dedication?” Martin asked, a bit surprised at the reason and worried his love with whom he had conversed every month would feel the same way. He got nervous at the prospect, seeing that he was to be visiting her before the day’s end to put an end to the long wait for marriage to happen.

“Yes, she didn’t think it was healthy,” Forrest said, sadly. “I understood early out that we would not work and I ended it before we got too entangled.”

“So you have been here, all alone in this big ole house the entire time?”

Forrest laughed. He was a good looking man and a gentleman so his response was not a surprising one. “I have had occasional company, but nothing too serious.”

Marin smiled. “At least you weren’t alone. Maybe now that I am home and intend to be married within the fortnight, you will find more time on your hands to go wow the women who must no doubt be clamoring for your attentions.”

The solemn look that flashed across Forrest’s face and stayed there was enough to tell him that something was wrong. “What is it?” he asked.

Forrest walked to the bar in the foyer and poured two generous shots of bourbon. “I think you will need to take a seat.”

“Tell me what it is!” he demanded, ignoring the drink the man offered him, but Forrest would not be coerced into responding until he was ready.

“Drink your drink and let’s have a seat out front.”

Martin took the glass from the older man and waited until he exited the house to take a seat on the front steps. “What is it?” Martin asked him again and this time he dug for all the patience he had left in the deepest part of his soul and tried to wait patiently for a response.

Forrest’s grey eyes bore into the dark brown of his and he could feel the arrival of bad news before it even got to him. “She has taken up with someone else,” he said softly, looking away to the trees that swayed gently in the late summer winds.

“What?!”

“Elena, your betrothed. She has taken up with another man,” he repeated.

“Impossible! I wrote to her just three weeks ago, telling her that I was coming home, and we wrote to one another every single month while I was away.”

Forrest looked at him in surprise. “But she has been married for nearly two years and is now carrying his second child,” he said confused.

Martin lost all control of his fingers and the glass slipped from his hand, breaking in echo to his heart in a million pieces. “Impossible...”

he croaked, a feeling his throat tightening, painfully.

“Do you wish to go see for yourself?” Forrest asked and it took him a minute before he could nod. If it hurt this much hearing the news then he could only imagine how much more devastated he would be at seeing its reality.

“Take me,” he said calmly, knowing he would never be able to believe it until he saw it, and even more so was the fact that he now desperately needed closure. How could she though? He had professed his love for her in each letter, every single month that he had been away, and she had echoed his every sentiment in her elegant hand writing that had been a solace to his aching soul. He had loved Elena for years and had been willing to defy the love of his own mother to be with her, Forrest must be mistaken for there was no way she could have done him such a wrong.

They saddled their horses in silence and rode at a gallop towards town with Forrest warning him to be calm and not create a scene when he found what he was being told to be true. Less than an hour later they hitched their horses to the post outside what was supposed to be her husband’s saloon and when he entered he would have fallen to his knees had Forrest not stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

“Elena?” he questioned the woman showing to be with child, and wearing a smile as gorgeous as he had remembered. Her long flowing hair that used to whip around when she walked, was cut into a short bob and her eyes were now strangers to his soul.

“Martin?” she asked in shock, setting the tray she carried aside. Her smile disappeared and her eyes welled with tears, and as if on cue the entire saloon went silent.

“Why?” he asked her around the lump in his throat, forgetting to breathe as his hear broke yet again. “Why did you lie to me?”

She took a step towards him, but he stepped away. “I didn’t want to hurt you,” she said sadly and a tear he did not believe slipped down her face.

“So you lie to a man longing to come home to you, only to know I would return to this?”

“I am sorry,” she said and took another step towards him.

He held a hand up to stop her. “I have known that people could be cruel, but this...this tops them all,” he said and walked out of the saloon.

Somewhere in the back of his head he heard her calling out to him, but he could not make out the words she was saying and he was certain he did not want to hear them either. As fast as he had rode into town he made his way back home with Forrest hot on his heels, and when he got to the house he wasted no time grabbing his duffel bag and heading right back out.

“Where are you going?” Forrest asked him saddened.

He hugged the man. “I cannot stay not now. You can give me a couple more months can’t you?” he asked

Sadness filled the man’s eyes but he nodded. “Take all the time you need. Where will you go?”

“I think I will head to Texas. I have a friend there, Lenard Collard.”

“I don’t know of him,” Forrest said.

Martin sighed. “We met in the war, he was a part of my platoon but he went home last year after a horrible accident. I think I will go see him and figure out if maybe Texas is as nice as they say it is.”

Forrest hugged him again, but this time he didn’t hold onto him “have fun ad come home soon. I will miss you.”

“I will be back in two months,” he said and set off for a place where he hoped his heartache would be cured and maybe just maybe, he would find himself a love of a lifetime.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

* * *

Emily sneezed again as she walked through town. Her nose ached and she could feel another cold coming on. This would be the second time in the two weeks since she had arrived in the cool hills of Minnesota that she would come down with a runny nose and a menacing cough.

"I will make you some soup as soon as we get home," her Aunt Josy said rubbing her back. Never before did she think she would have missed the dry acrid temperatures of the south, and she was beginning to question her smarts as to why she had chosen to move to a place so cold her first time. The town's doctor had made it clear that she wasn't in any ailing condition or suffering from some bug she might have picked up, she was simply adjusting to the thinner and colder air. She wished she would just adjust already.

She smiled in gratitude at her Aunt's suggestion and prayed it would be enough. She had eaten more soup in the last two weeks than she ever had in her life. They turned into her small grocery store and Emily immediately busied herself behind the store counter just as the rotund derriere of the town's gossip wheeled in with such flounder, that even the shelves could not help but be bothered.

"Josy! Josy!" The woman called for her Aunt. "Where is she?" She turned to Emily and demanded.

"Good evening Mrs Hall," she pointed out politely that the woman had forgotten her manners. There was no return of a salutation and Emily frowned at her in dismay. "She is in the back."

"What is all the raucous about Jane?" Her Aunt rushed out addressing the woman. Emily rolled her eyes. She had come to find her Aunt was quite a likable woman, but the need to gossip as much as Jane did was a bit annoying and every now and then she found herself missing the humming of the pots and pans at the ranch as she would give them a washing. She missed Jenny's soft voice chattering away about nothing in general and Lenard's insistence on bothering her in the kitchen. But even then she liked the cold of Minnesota and the difference in the culture and the people she found there, so she paid the women no mind as they started chattering about a war veteran who had come home today to find his fiancé had off and married another man. Apparently, they had all thought he was dead.

How cold and callous it must have been to find himself in such a fix, but yet these older women were amused by what must have been his heartbreak. She sighed and tuned them out as she went about restocking the empty shelves.

"Excuse me," a soft voice interrupted her musings and she turned to look at the freckled face of Sara Jones, a bit of an outcast in town having moved there for some unknown reason.

"Yes," Emily said smiling at her. "How can I help you?"

"I am looking for honey, but I can't seem to find any on your shelf," the woman who must have been her own age looked away from her. Emily had heard mean things being said about her too, but this was the second time she had been around her and she found the girl quite nice and polite.

"We ran out this morning, but I am due to go collect a few bottles from the farm down the road in an hour or so if you don't mind

coming back."

Sara sighed and looked around at Ms Hall, who was fixated on her with a disdainful eye. "No, I am okay. Thank you."

Emily watched her hurry from the store and then suffered a talk from the nosy woman. "Don't you be getting friendly with that girl. She is no good."

"And how do you know that?"

"People talk," Ms Hall said with so much absolution Emily was sure she thought that was an explanation enough.

"I am not much of a fan of gossip, so I don't really care," she responded and grabbed her coat to head out after Sara.

"Hi there!" She called to the woman who was walking with sagging shoulders through the town. "Take a walk with me to pick them up."

Sara smiled and tried to decline, but Emily would not take no for an answer and so they walked in silence to the farm just fifteen minutes away.

"You should boil some cerise tea for the cold you have coming on, and put some lavender oil on your pillow, by morning it would be gone."

Emily looked at her suspiciously. "That tea is as bitter as they come. I think I will pass."

Sara laughed. "Try it, you won't regret it."

They spoke about how she had learned of the powers of herbs and how she came to know so much. Emily learned that the woman had worked with a botanist for most of her life. As they spoke, she could feel a friendship blossoming, and by the time they had collected the jars of honey and made their way back to the store, lunch the following day was a plan. After two weeks she had finally made a friend and she wrote home to Jenny about her that night.

"Have you thought about marriage Emily?" Her aunt rudely interrupted their dinner hours later with her prying comments. "You aren't getting any younger, you know."

She was well aware of that fact and wanted to tell the woman that much but decided against being rude. It was not in her nature.

"I have," she responded, trying to keep her calm, "but I want to find the perfect man."

"There is no such thing," her Aunt responded without missing a beat. "Soon you will find you have ended up like me- a barren spinster."

Emily laughed at the nonchalance with which the woman stated her hopeless situation.

"Find a man soon Emily and make sure you have man tiny children to fill your home with laughter."

Emily had been thinking about it for a while, but considering she had just moved to town, adjusting had not yet been completed and so she had not yet met any man she liked about these parts. When she was further settled she would think about it some more and if needs

be she would try Jenny's way- Mail order bride.

It seemed to have worked out for Jenny; maybe she would have the same luck. If all didn't go well then she would just go back to Texas.

* * *

Martin pulled the curtains to the carriage as the driver announced that they were pulling up to the Collard ranch. It was midday after three weeks of travelling by train and coach and he was happy to now be getting off the road. He could feel the Texas heat from his place behind the glass and he was sure he would have a heat stroke the minute he stepped outside.

“Martin!” Lenard rushed down the stairs two at a time to his carriage and pulled his war riddled friend into his embrace. “It is so good to see you old friend,” he said.

Martin rested his forehead against Lenard’s and took a deep breath. For a moment he forgot that his heart was breaking and that he felt as lost as a lamb in the woods. In that moment he was just happy to be alive and even happier to see an old friend he had almost lost to the war that he often found himself wondering what the point of it all was in the first place.

His fingers traced the scars on Lenard’s face and he look at him sadly. “Forever marked by the greed and inability of men to live peacefully,” he lamented.

“An experience I will not soon forget, but one that pales in comparison to the fact that I survived.”

Martin had to agree with that as they reminisced some more about the days they spent wallowing in mud and dodging bullets and spears. He felt human again for the first time in weeks and the memory of the love of his life carrying another man's child slowly slipped away.

"Martin, meet my wife Jenny," Lenard said to him as she came walking down the stairs carrying a toddler with a head full of red hair and his father's entrancing blue eyes.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he said, inclining his head slightly in respect before plucking the drooling child from her hands. "And this little fellow here?" he asked tossing the child in the air. The toddler squealed in delight revealing two tiny teeth and a smile that mirrored that of his mother.

"This is Jake," Jenny said with a smile as she pulled her husband close to her and looked at Martin. "He likes you," she pointed out as Jake slapped his tiny hand against his cheeks and tried to speak in a language Marin did not understand.

"He is a smart little man," he said, "for I am quite likable and I can cook!"

They family laughed. "Don't let my cook hear you say that or you might find she puts you out faster than you have had time to get acquainted," a deeper voice said from behind them, and Martin turned to look at a smashing man who stood a head taller than he did with the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"You must be Adam, Lenard's smarter brother," he said expertly shifting the child to his hip and holding out a hand.

“Don’t let Lenard hear you say that,” Adam said with a laugh. “You must be Martin, Lenard has spoken to me about you. Welcome to our home. I hope you enjoy it here.”

“By the smell of things, I most certainly will,” he said turning his attention to the smell of pot roast and freshly baked goodies coming from the kitchen.

“I see some things have not changed,” Lenard laughed, slapping in him on the back. “Let’s feed you then, you must be starving after such a long trip.”

He did not hesitate, nor did he pass the child back to the waiting arms of his mother. “Little Jake here is going to get to know his Uncle Martin for a bit if you don’t mind.”

Jenny smiled at him and he had to stand in awe of her beauty. “Be my guest, just don’t let his father feed him too much cake.”

Martin saluted her and followed Lenard to the kitchen where he had his fill and so did little Jake from his plate. They spoke about the war and of what they came home to find after it had ended, and again Martin was reminded of his heartbreak even as little Jake dozed in his arms, his stomach full.

“Why do you have such a look of melancholy on your face?” Lenard asked him.

He sighed. “You came home from the war to find love and I came home to find my love had been busy loving someone else.”

Lenard got up and poured him a drink but didn’t seem too

surprised. “I have learned not to mourn over lost love, sometimes it is the universe’s twisted way of doing us a huge favor.”

“It doesn’t feel that way,” he said as Jenny walked in and picked the sleeping child from his hold.

“Trust me,” Lenard said looking after her, “when the love is real you will know it and it will be there to stay.”

Martin couldn’t help but smile and be happy for the arrival of his friend. “Oh how time changes things. Used to be I was the hopeless romantic and you were the sceptic. Now look at us.”

The men laughed over scotch and Lenard told him the story of how he met his wife. They talked well into the night and even had time to visit the medical house where the wounded veterans were busy trying to hold themselves together.

“A mail order bride?” he asked, having heard of the idea but never before had he taken to it. He was a man who much preferred meeting women the traditional way, but that hadn’t worked out for him in previous attempts and so he was ready to try something new.

“Jenny can help you write the advertisement in the morning,” Lenard said as they made their way back to the main house. He surrendered to the idea and looked forward to the possibilities it might bring.

“In the meantime, what is there to do in your town?” Martin asked him.

“Well tomorrow we throw a banquet in honor of the veterans, so

at least for now you will have a bit of entertainment. Sleep came easy to him that night, for the first time in weeks and he felt oddly guilty about it when he woke. He brushed it from his mind, guilt was really not his to be feeling and he was not about to assume it for no reason at all.

“Good, you are awake,” Lenard said when he knocked on his door minutes later. “I have made an appointment for you at the tailor in town for you to find a suit for the night’s festivities.”

Before he could protest Lenard was pulling him to the breakfast table where Adam and Jenny argued about the menu while they stared on in utter amusement. “Are they always like this?”

Lenard smiled and looked at the two people frowning at each other with nothing but love. “Yes, they are like this every time we throw a party. Little Jake and I tend to sit these out.”

Martin laughed and less than an hour later he was on his way to town with the driver who had collected him from the train station. He walked into a tailor’s shop nestled on the side of the slope overlooking the town and wondered how this man found anything he was looking for amid the rubbles he called his work space. When a dashing young woman stepped forward from a room to the back to take his measurement, he was momentarily enthralled.

“You are a friend of the Collards?” she asked. The awe in her eyes spoke of nothing that had substance, but he humored her anyway.

“Yes.”

She giggled, nearly sticking him with a pin. “Gorgeous men. I

hope my husband will be just as rich and pretty as they are.”

He tuned her out from there on, because all she spoke of was the riches she supposed they had and the fact that she would give anything to be married to a man like them. Now he understood why Lenard had said his brother had opted for a wife from out of town. When he left there and went on the errands Jenny had given him, he was even more disappointed to find that almost all the women in the town were like that. They spoke of materialistic gains and the ones who did not, already had rings on their fingers stating they were taken. He of course did not write all the women off, but he was sure that this town would not give him the kind of love he was looking for and so he was even more taken with the idea of a mail order bride.

That evening, just before the festivities were to begin, Jenny helped him place an advertisement in the papers across several states.

“You will have to wait a while,” she said to him when she was done. “I have time to wait for the woman who is to be mine,” he pointed out, and the truth was that he was in no rush.

Jenny followed him to have a postal box opened in the town, where mail would be sent and he then turned his mind to enjoying the food and the music of the night ahead of him. To be inebriated was not on his list of things to do, and he promised the parents and hosts they could sleep late the next morning while he hung out with Little Jake who he had grown quite fond of. His mind was far afield that night and he heard nothing of the women who Lenard constantly sent his way. He twirled them on the dance floor, this way and that, but it was nothing more than a dance for him.

“Are you okay?” Jenny asked him.

He turned and took her on the dance floor. "I am a sad and broken hearted man," he said, and it was the honest truth.

She tapped his chest where his heart beat in time with the music. "In here you are a good man, and love has its own timing. I have learned that when a door closes another is soon to open, and so rushing your life will not help."

He sighed. "What do you suggest I do in the meantime?" He asked, honestly at a loss.

"Go home or stay here as long as you wish, but focus on doing things you enjoy. The more you occupy your time, the more you will find that your heart will mend itself."

He smiled down at her. "Now I know why old Lenard is so smitten by you."

"Why is that?" She asked him moving in time with him.

"You are a soothsayer and an amazing friend." He barely knew her but that feeling was truly what he felt and he was happy his friend had found an amazing woman to love him beyond his scars.

He took her word for it, and for the next month he responded to letters that came in response to his mail order bride ad, but found nothing interesting. Reading the last one he threw it in frustration on the floor, and to little Jake's delight it was another piece of paper to play with.

"I will be an old man with a couple cats who will dote on you for the rest of your life Little Jake," he said, sitting on the floor so the

child could crawl all over him drooling as he went.

"He will grow up and be off someday," Lenard said from the doorway, walking in to drop a stack of letters on his chest. "New suitors."

Martin groaned and tossed them aside. So far he had found all the women lacking in one thing or the other. He was tired of being disappointed. He excused himself for a walk in the late evening sun, and took with him his letters.

There was Katarina of Mississippi, who kept speaking of her qualities as if she were applying for a job. There was Cara of New York, whose prose was so horribly written he could barely understand her, Martha of Georgia who spoke of her dead cat several times and the list went on and on. He was just about to throw the whole lot out when he saw the elegant penmanship from a woman named Emily. She spoke of travel and longing for adventure. She spoke of the war and what losing people meant and how it fuelled her appreciation of those around her. He was enthralled in her letter that was two pages long and spoke very little of herself directly. But from what she wrote he learned so much of the woman who had penned those words. She was a woman of deep thought and one who seemed to look at the world through colored lenses. She was someone he could get to know. The letter was addressed from a town on the border of Minnesota and he smiled. So close to home. He would respond to this one, maybe there was something there.

"You are smiling," Jenny said when he walked back into the house.

"I might have found one," he said smiling and twirling her to the

silence around them for a moment. He kissed Jake's sleeping head before making his way to his room to respond. He would have this Emily respond to his home, because come the weekend he was going to stop wallowing in his own sorrows and go back to Minnesota to pick up where he had left off. Elena had broken his heart, but life would go on.

* * *

CHAPTER 3

* * *

Two weeks later, Emily read the letter three times and each time she smiled. She liked this man who made light of his broken heart and the fact that if she decided to meet him she would have to be prepared to help him mend.

I am not looking for a woman to fix me, but one who understands that I am a broken instrument that can still play a good tune or too.

She found him to be a man who embraced the reality of what his life was and that was something she could appreciate.

"What are you smiling about?" Sara asked.

She held up the letter with a big grin. "I think he might be the one."

Sara took her time reading the letters before she smiled and turned back to Emily. "He sure spins a good story. How do you know he is for real?"

"I don't but I am willing to find out," Emily replied and that she was. The letter said he was from Minnesota, and she was happy she would not have to travel far.

"When do you meet him?"

"In two weeks on the other side of the state," she replied, joyfully. "I hope he is as sweet as his words are."

For the next two weeks, Emily envisioned her Martin in every kind of way. She thought of him as a man of honor, a drunk, a surly big bellied man and even as a mute. She tried to prepare herself for every possibility, and when the second note came to establish their meeting for the following Saturday, she was so nervous Sara had to feed her cups of chamomile at a time.

"What if he doesn't like me?" She constantly asked.

"Then he would be a bit thick in the head," Sara responded with a smile as she helped Emily braid her hair and get ready for bed.

"What if he is an angry man?"

"Then you treat him sweetly and hope that a soft answer each time will help."

Emily wasn't so sure about that one. She had seen angry men who took their rage out on the world and she was not interested in a man like that. She would most certainly go back to Texas if that was the case.

"Stop worrying," Sara demanded and tried to sooth her before bed. She crawled in and prayed that come the weekend her three hour trip to meet this Martin Longmore didn't spell ill for her.

They following Saturday her heart was beating faster than that of the horses she often saw galloping around town. She tried pacing to calm herself, only to find that didn't work.

"Tell her if she doesn't calm down she is going to drop dead before she meets her husband to be," her Aunt Josy said to Sara.

"I already did that," Sara said with a sigh.

"Tell her men don't want women who show up sweaty for no reason at all," Aunt Josy said, looking at her worriedly as she paced back and forth.

Sara sighed. "I already did that, too."

"Tell her if she is so worried maybe she should just stay here and forget it," Aunt Josy said louder, dropping yet another hint that she wanted Emily to get married, but at no point did she suggest she do so and move clear across the country.

"I did that, too," Sara said, "but I really want her to go."

Emily sat in a huff and glared at the women in silence. They sipped their tea knowing better than to say anything to her. That was their symmetry for the next fifteen minutes until a carriage pulled up outside Aunt Josy's house and a man about her age stepped out, fully decked out in a tailored suit with a fur coat draped over his shoulders. She opened the door before he could knock.

"Ah, Ms Emily Johnston?" He asked looking at her a bit surprised at how fast she had opened the door. She lost the ability to speak as she looked at him and Sara came to her rescue.

"Yes, she is."

The man extended an arm to her. "I am Forrest, Mr Longmore's caretaker. He sent me to fetch you for evening tea. If we leave now then we can make it before sunset."

Emily stared at the hand, willing herself out of the stupor that

gripped her but nothing happened and again Sara came to her rescue.

The man frowned at Emily before addressing Sara. "I think maybe you should accompany her."

Sara looked at her for confirmation and she managed to shake her head in agreement. The young girl took less than ten minutes to throw some things into a small suitcase, and before long they were boarding the carriage and heading to the other side of the state.

"Breathe Emily, breathe," Sara kept telling her and to be honest she felt so much better with her friend there. She found her nerve enough to hold a conversation with Forrest who sat across from them with a perpetual frown.

"My apologies for my earlier state of catatonia," she said with a smile. "It is just that this is a big move and for a moment there I lost myself in all the possible fears that could become reality."

He smiled at her. "It happens to the best of us, but I was honestly beginning to worry."

"That I was crazy?" She asked with a laugh.

"No," the man said, his face going serious. "That Martin had gotten his hopes up for no reason at all."

Emily was shocked by his blatant honesty, but she wasn't offended by it. She had grown to appreciate the callous truth and the clarity that comes with it.

"Is he a hopeful man this Martin?"

Forrest smiled and this time his eyes twinkled. She could see he had a kind of love and loyalty for the man she was asking about. "He is a man who dreams of magical things like love and unicorns."

"He is a man with a heart," she said happy she was nit wrong from what he had read.

"Yes," Forrest said, the hardness returning to his face, "and I would rather he be alone than enthralled with any woman who could not appreciate him."

Emily's smile disappeared and she realized that as much as this man she travelled with was a gentleman and had treated her with nothing but honesty and respect, the bigger issue was that she now realized it was not Martin Longmore she would have to convince that she could be a good wife, it was Forrest. Such dynamics did nothing to keep her calm and she looked at Sara whose face echoed the same sentiment. For the next two hours of the ride she remained silent, choosing to focus instead on the cool winds nipping at her face through the window and the Kaleidoscope of late summer colors that they passed by. She smiled at Sara who rubbed her hand in support occasionally, and tried as best she could not to look at Forrest. She had never before had to prove herself worthy to anyone or anything and she found the thought offensive, but she knew that sometimes, she had to take a step back and ensure that she didn't become her own worst enemy. One thing was for sure though, as much as this man was to be her husband assuming they liked each other, she was not going to be the only one who would have to prove themselves worthy of affection and a lifetime of commitment. If she had learned anything in life, it was that these things were a matter of mutual understanding and acceptance, and without which, such a union would fail.

CHAPTER 4

* * *

Martin paced the expanse of his living room trying his best to not wear a hole in the bottom of his boots. They were late and he was worried that his Emily had decided against meeting him. She did seem to have a fierce spirit from her emails and even more was the fact that she seemed to have a strong sense about herself. He had liked it instantly, but what if his willingness to show her his weaknesses had been his own undoing?

To spare himself from falling prey to his own mind, he decided to maybe put his black suit on, the grey one and the weather was making him look a little drab, and he had already decided that he wanted to look his best. Not that he was banking on his good looks but he did want to make a lasting first impression. When he heard the carriage pulling up minutes later, he froze on the spot, but then he rushed to splash some cold water on his face. His cook was amused at his behavior.

"Am I acting like a child?" He asked her worriedly.

"No," she said to him with a smile. "This is exactly how your father used to behave when he was courting your mother."

Knowing that soothed him and he kissed her on the cheek with immense gratitude. "Thank you Rosa." Then taking a deep breath he made his way down to the foyer and out into the brisk winds as Forrest stepped out of the carriage and helped a beautiful doe eyed woman out behind him. She stole his heart with the timid smile she wore, and as if on their own accord his feet carried him down to her.

"Martin sir," Forrest said, "meet Miss Emily Johnston."

They smiled at each other and Martin was at loss for words as her big brown eyes pulled him in. All his worries ceased and his soul rocked in time to her heartbeat. He knew then and there that there was no question as to whether or not he would marry this woman. He would marry her if she would have him.

"And, I would also like you to meet, Miss Sara," Forrest broke their trance as he helped a more fragile young woman from the back of the carriage. He looked at Emily confused.

"I was worrying myself into the ground, and so Sara was offered the opportunity to accompany me and accepted. I hope you don't mind sir," Emily explained and he could hear the worry in her voice.

"Not at all!" He exclaimed taking Sara's hand and kissing the back of her palm. "Any friend of yours is more than welcome to stay here, too. Especially anyone who has helped you in your time of need."

"Thank you," she said and he wasted no time bundling her up the stairs and out of the cold evening breeze. Behind him, Forrest wore a frown he chose to ignore for the moment. Maybe something had happened on their trip there, but that would be something he could handle later. For now he was more interested in getting to know his bride to be. While the women went to freshen up for dinner, he took a moment of solitude in his library to mull over the decision of a lifetime he was about to make. Later as he sat over the luscious five course meal his cook had prepared they spoke about what life was like for them.

"So Emily," he said "you mentioned in your letters that you are not

from Minnesota. What on earth would have propelled you to move to the freezing north?"

She chuckled at that and it was a melodious sound to his ear. "Adventure and change," was her only response.

"And have you found it here? Last I check this place wasn't as adventurous as the south."

"Adventure is relative I guess," she said and her brows furrowed ever so slightly as she became consumed by thought. "I guess what most appealed to me was change."

"Did you hate the South that much?"

"Oh no!" She exclaimed. "I loved Texas and the Collard family that I worked for-"

"Did you say Collard family?" He asked in shock.

"Yes," she said hesitantly, frowning at the smile that creased his face.

"As in Adam and Lenard Collard who recently married a woman named Jenny, from Georgia?"

"Yes!" She exclaimed. "I grew up on the collard ranch and Jenny and I are the best of friends. A sweet and kind hearted woman she is."

Martin felt like all the chips had fallen into place. "I met Lenard in the war shortly before he was injured and I have just come back from a visit with them. Jenny is indeed a sweet soul."

She smiled at him. "A very small world it is."

Martin reached across the table to take her hand in his and for a moment the others seated at the table did not exist. It was just them and the strength of a deepening connection. "Nothing in life is ever merely a coincidence, and I would be honored if you will be my bride."

"But... you barely know me," Emily stuttered.

He smiled assuredly at her. "Lenard told me just days ago, not to cry over lost love, because when it is real it is undeniable."

Emily blushed and a tear escaped her eye. "That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"And I mean every word. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife Emily Johnston?"

She looked him in the eye and beneath the tears that threatened to break their borders he saw love and hope. "Yes," she whispered, much to Sara's delight.

And just like that it was settled. The rest of the dinner was followed by Sara's excited chatter as she appointed herself wedding planner and proceeded unhindered. Emily didn't speak much for the rest of the night but her happy glow was all the silent words he needed.

"So you think you love her then?" Forrest's sombre voice disrupted his visions of what his life would soon be like with the woman he loved.

"I feel strongly about her and as I get to know her I will love her."

Forrest sighed and walked into the library handing him a glass of scotch. "Don't you think you are rushing things here? Two months ago you were heartbroken and devastated. You ran half way across the country so you could get over Elena. Now here you are two months later marrying a woman you just met."

Martin turned to him surprised at the words coming out of his mouth. "I thought you would be happy for me."

"I am happy for you. I just want to make sure you are not rushing into committing yourself to a woman who just conveniently showed up."

"Conveniently?" He asked and anger simmered beneath the surface. "What are you implying Forrest?"

The older man took a seat by the window gazing into the darkness that surrounded the property. "I am saying do not rush matters of the heart. Think about this for a while."

"Why are you just now telling me this after you have known about her for weeks now?"

"I don't trust her intentions. A little kitchen maid suddenly happening upon wealth through mail order suggested by her best friend who is also a mail order bride? Tell me it doesn't all just seem a bit too convenient, Martin."

He sighed and looked at the man he had come to love and respect like a father. "I think you have been in my devious family for too long,

Forrest."

"Even then, the committing of yourself to another is not something to be done on a whim. Think it over Martin, long and hard. After the magic of her beauty and warmth has faded, what else will you have agreed to?"

His words were harsh and offensive, but a seed had been planted and Martin was no longer in a trance of love. He was instead now thinking about life and what it would mean after marriage. He saw no reason not to trust Emily's arrival in his life and even less to assume that his war scarred friend had somehow conveniently arranged this. Even so it was an arrangement that could bring good things to his life, but the seed had been planted. He closed his eyes trying to ward off the headache that had suddenly made itself known.

He was tired of having to always make these considerations. He was tired of always feeling like this one aspect of his life would never work out. He pulled the letters Emily had written to him and sat in the glow of the dim candle light reading them again. She spoke of nothing but her lust for life and a willingness to have something good come of it. He found no vagueness as she answered all the questions he had asked and then some, but Forrest had planted a nagging seed and the prospect of his heart breaking again was not something he could handle.

Maybe he should take it slow with her... if she was the real deal then nothing could change that.

For the next two days he made himself scarce trying to avoid being around when she was. Breakfast he took earlier and spent all his days visiting the various businesses his family owned throughout the

town. He even had time to visit a few old friends who had all managed to get married and have children while he had been busy fighting for their freedom. It did not anger him and it didn't make him feel despair. It just made him want to be with Emily even more so. Lord knows what she must be thinking of his sudden absence from the house. He pulled his coat on and left the pharmacy and the impeccable books Forrest had kept over the years. Walking slowly through the town he made his way to the bridge over the lake close by and pulled a loaf of bread from a satchel for the ducks.

"You have been scarce," he heard a familiar voice behind him and turned to look at the face of the woman he had loved... he was sure he still loved her, too. A love like the one he had felt for her did not just disappear.

"Elena," he said with a sad smile, noting that the woman was no longer pregnant. "How are you?"

She leaned against the bridge beside him and nudged him with her shoulder. "Would I be horrible if I said I was okay, even though I can tell that you aren't?"

He chuckled. "No need for such diplomacy. You have made a good life for yourself and you should be happy."

She crumpled bread between her fingers and dropped it in the water and for a moment they watched in silence as the fish danced up and down plucking the treat from the surface.

"What bothers you?" She asked him.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with." His response was

harsher than he had intended it to be and he could see the color drain from her face.

"I am sorry for prying. You just looked like you could use a friend, so I stopped by."

She walked away and he stopped her. "I didn't mean to be rude and thank you. I really could use a friend."

"What has you frowning?"

"I think I have met someone who I am meant to share my life with but Forrest doesn't trust her intentions for me."

"Hmm, we all know and trust his judgement and he is a honorable man. If he says you should think about it then you should."

"I think she is a honorable woman who used to work for some friends I have down south."

"Did you meet her there?" She asked him and he explained to her how they came to be.

"I trust her," he said. "I have not been given good reason not to."

"Sounds like quite the coincidental romance," she said smiling at him as he tossed more bread into the lake with frustration. "The one thing I have learned in life is that when love comes a calling there is little that will make logical sense. If your heart says this is right, then don't question it."

He turned to her trying to convince himself not to state the obvious but he did. "My heart thought you were the right one."

"And at the time we were perfect for each other and then the situation changed. It does not mean you made a mistake, it simply means we cannot predict life and we shouldn't try to. Make the best of what you have and know now, and work for even better. If you believe this woman is meant for you shove all the semantics aside and go build something awesome. So much of what life has to offer would simply pass us by if we gave in to our every doubt. Love is a beautiful thing, stop moping around and go get your girl."

He smiled at her convincing argument and in that instance found forgiveness for her breaking his heart. He pulled her in for a hug and then they turned back to feeding the fish.

"I want us to be friends Martin," she said.

"I think we can be."

An hour later when he walked home his spirit was lighter and his heart was overflowing with nothing but gratitude for Emily, but the face that greeted him at the dinner table was anything but happy and neither Sara nor Forrest was around.

* * *

CHAPTER 5

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Emily was still hurting from the words she had heard Forrest say two nights before. Not everybody she had met had been nice to her, but never before had she ever been insulted and mistrusted because of some perceived ill she had never committed nor would ever commit. He had made it seem as if she was simply after Martin's family fortune. In truth, she had not even been aware of his wealth until she had arrived. She had not been interested in it, because for her money did not mean that she would be happy. She was more interested in love and support rather than the material gains that came with a large estate, and she had been nothing but jubilant to meet this man she was so taken with now. Yet here he stood before two days later after avoiding her at every turn. She was insulted, and she would rather be the maid in another man's kitchen for the rest of her life than be caught up in insult and wrong doing.

"Emily, is everything okay?" he asked her, his steps slowing as he walked to the table. "Where is Sara and Forrest, aren't they joining us for dinner?"

"I asked them to allow us this evening to speak, since you seem intent on avoiding all contact with me," she responded flatly, bringing her glass of wine to her lips.

"I am sorry if it seemed--"

She held her hands up to stop him from speaking. "I want you to listen to me for a moment Martin, please," she said. She was angry and hurt, but she also wanted to be respectful while she voiced what

was going on in her head and in her heart.

“Okay,” he said and took a seat. She poured him a double shot of scotch and did not miss the smile that flickered in his eyes. She had learned things about him in the short time she had been around and this is why this talk was so important.

“I come from a family who shipped me off to work on the collard ranch as soon as I was old enough to be of any use to anyone. All I have known most of my life is how to work hard and be honorable, a job for which you will be compensated as is deemed appropriate. I learned that and it is something I am okay with. Never once did I ever think of coming by more through some less than acceptable way, for greed will not be my downfall.”

She paused and took a seat closer to him, sipping from her wine glass to calm herself before she spoke again.

“I overheard Forrest talking to you the other night,” she said but this time she couldn’t hide the pain in her voice. “I came looking for you to ask if it was possible to get more fire wood for my room as it was a bit cold, and the cook directed me to your library, where I heard him call me an opportunist.”

“Emily...” he began running a hand across his face. She waited for more but it seemed his words failed him just then and there was nothing else to come after that.

“I am but a humble woman looking for love and adventure with someone who will see life as more than the material things collected over time. If you were broke I would still be this taken by you because from what I saw in the letters you are a man with a lot of soul and I

like that. But then you have avoided me for two days and I am insulted. Then to add insult to injury, I went for a walk today and saw you smiling with someone else.”

“She is just a friend!” he interjected before his intentions could be misconstrued.

“It doesn’t matter who she is. The fact still remains that she was able to have a conversation with you and you didn’t even allow me that luxury. If I am not what you want then I will go, albeit sadly for having never been given the opportunity I think I deserve, and if you need more time to mull this over then say it. Don’t treat me as if I have done something wrong, because I have not.”

“I apologize,” he said. “It was never my intention to insult you.”

She looked at him expecting him to say more, but realizing nothing else was forthcoming she decided to make her position clear. “I will give you a couple days to think things over and if you decide you want to continue as decided then we can start afresh. If not, then I will return to my home by the end of the week.

“I do not need time Emily. I have chosen you.”

She froze in her retreat unable to believe the words coming out of his mouth. “What did you say?”

I said I chose you. I chose you from the first letter you sent, you can ask your friend Jenny. She didn’t know who had responded but my excitement and joy were undeniable. I chose you a long time ago and I look forward to a life with you, if you will still have me of course.

She smiled around the tears that matted her eyes, unsure what she should say.

“Will you still have me?” he asked her, and she could hear the silent prayer that never left his lips to her ear.

“y-Yes,” she whispered and he stood from his seat to pull her into an embrace.

“I promise to never make you feel less than worthy or unwanted ever again,” he whispered in her hair. She was unsure of how long they stood there embracing each other, but when they did let go she felt a burden had been lifted from her shoulder, and with its departure she felt nothing but love flow back in.

When she fell asleep that night she was neither anxious nor worried, instead she was grateful for all the possibilities her life had now offered. She had never before believed she needed a man to complete her, but for everything that she wanted of her life she wanted a husband to share it with. And maybe, just maybe she had found that.

When she woke the following day, a smiling Sara was seated in her bedroom. "I thought you were going to sleep all day!" Her friend said, making her realize that she had slept longer than she intended to. When Sara pulled the curtains wide open she was well aware of that fact, as the light came so rudely streaking in.

"What time is it?" She asked sleepily as her body protested the fact that she would soon need to get up and go be a responsible adult.

"Almost time for a mid-morning snack."

She bolted upright in bed. "Why didn't you wake me, Sara?"

"Because your doting husband to be told me to let you rest. I explained how you hated to miss getting an early start but he was not having it, so I resigned to watching you sleep to ensure that you weren't dead."

Emily chuckled at her dark sense of humor and flopped back in bed. "Not like I have anything to do anyway."

"Oh quite the contrary. He has given me the go ahead to plan your autumn wedding and he said I should spare no expenses."

Emily had only known Sara for a few weeks and she loved her already, but the one thing she knew was that being told to spare no expenses meant that their wedding would probably be extremely extravagant, and this made her want to call the pastor and sign the papers to seal the deal.

"I want a small wedding Sara," she pointed out as Sara shoved her out of bed and towards the bath.

"Fine a small wedding, be ready when I get back."

While she soaked in the warm bath one of the housemaids had prepared, she decide that she would hold an extensive dialogue with Martin about him inveigling her friend into all kinds of creative doings, and the fact that she might just die from all the excitement. She was to find out after that none of her day was to be her own. Sara hauled her from store to store, buying all sorts of goodies and decor for her big day. The last stop on the way was to the tailor, a wiry haired man with bony fingers who smiled at Sara's incessant chatter

without once saying a word.

"Tell her to be quiet," Emily begged him as he took her measurements for the dress she would wear on one of the most memorable days of her life. The old man laughed and remained silent, having been used to the excitement.

Later that evening after dinner as she stood in the foyer while Forrest played from the grand piano, Martin asked her how her day went.

"Sara has been transformed into a raging wedding planning woman. She won't give me a break!"

"I heard that!" Sara called to them from where she sat enjoying Forrest's playing.

"I don't think I will have any energy left for the wedding," Emily whispered to him and he wrapped his hand around her with a smile and placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"You will," he promised and she did. Three weeks later on that big day she was as excited as Sara had been, but this time she was excited more about the man she was to marry and less about the people who were there and what they expected. She was sure that all of their expectations had been met. Sara had out done herself and Emily loved her so much for it. She was a nervous wreck when she woke only to find the familiar red hair and gorgeous smile waiting at the foot of the bed to comfort her.

"Jenny!" she screamed with glee and jumped up embracing the woman who had become her best friend. Tears of joy streamed down

her face and Emily didn't want to let the woman go. "I didn't know you were going to make it."

"I would not have missed your wedding for the world," Jenny said wiping her tears away. A small squeal by the foot of her bed directed her attention downward and Little Jake reached his arms up to her. She stepped off the bed and swooped him up, happy that he was brought along as well. She threw him up in the air revelling in his squeals and when she hugged him close he gave her wet kisses all over her face. Looking around the room at the people who stood there she was happy. For weeks she had thought about the fact that she had no family to sit on her side of the aisle but here they were and she said a prayer of gratitude for having found them.

"And Lenard?" she asked.

"I am here," she turned to her doorway to look at the man who had been her brother and confidant over the years. He held his arms out to her and he hugged her so tight she felt all the worry leave her. "Years ago I promised you that I would walk you down the aisle on your wedding day. Do you think I would have missed it for the world?"

She was too overwhelmed to answer his question and was spared by Sara who ushered them all out to start getting ready for what was to be an exceptional day of festivities.

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CHAPTER 6

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"It is truly a small world isn't it?" Martin's musings were interrupted by Lenard who stood by his open door. He was hoping he would see Emily before they got married, but it seems the women were busy doing whatever women did when they were to get married.

"It is," he said embracing his friend. "I am happy you are here. She deserves to have people she cares about here today."

Lenard frowned at him as if that was not the response he had expected. "Is everything okay? Not getting cold feet are you?"

"What if I make a horrible husband, Lenard? What if I am nothing she ever dreamed of having?"

Lenard chuckled. "All you can do is be the man you know you are. Show up and never ever let her think she is alone."

"And everything else?"

"It will all work itself out my friend," Lenny assured him. "And if it doesn't just remember women love flowers, wine and sweet words before they fall asleep. It hasn't failed me yet."

They laughed out loud at that.

"What's so funny?" Jenny walked in and Little Jake immediately reached for his Uncle Martin who tossed him so high his parent's stopped breathing.

"Martin is worried he won't be what Emily wants."

She kissed him and pinched his cheeks. "Most times us women really don't even know what we want so just be a good man and father and you will be fine."

"She is lucky to have had you folks in Texas," Martin said to them, tickling Jake who was trying to wiggle out of his hand.

"We are all lucky to have each other," Jenny corrected and that was the truth.

They all stood in silence for a moment to appreciate the magic of what was happening before Jenny left the men to their musing and left Little Jake along with them. Forrest walked in an hour later carrying a small box and Lenard excused himself to give them privacy.

"I see you have decided to continue," the man said and He couldn't quite figure out if he was just being cautious or simply being stern in his resolution that maybe Emily and his friends were not who they said they were.

"I have decided to marry her, because I find her to be a virtuous woman and I will not treat her as anything but. Tell me Forrest, why do you have such an issue with a woman you have not given yourself the chance to get to know?"

"Is it that you feel threatened by me?" Emily asked from the doorway and both men turned to look at her in shock.

"I would like to speak to Martin in private," Forrest said to her clenching his jaw in preparation for a fight, but Emily didn't give him

that. What she did next proved to him that the woman he was to wed was a woman of exceptional character.

"Forrest you made it clear the day you came to collect me that you had Martin's best interest at heart and you would let no one harm him. I am happy you hold him so dear. I am happy the man I am growing to love so much has a friend and father figure like you in his corner and I would never take that away from you. But he is a man who deserves to love and be loved, so why can't you let it be?"

"Because he has proven that his judgement is not sound when it comes to women," Forrest said without remorse, sipping from his tea mug.

Martin wanted to step in but he knew this was an argument that would forever be a problem if these two did not work it out themselves and so he kept quiet. There were many battles he was prepared to fight on Emily's behalf for as long as he would be alive, but this was one she had to fight herself or Forrest would never take her seriously.

"I am not like any of the other women in his life. I am here to stay and I am here for him and nothing more. I will always respect your place in his life and even I find your counsel to be a wise one. All I ask is that you stop belittling what we are trying to build and if you cannot support it then don't try to tear it down with your negativity. I am here and I am here to stay until Martin tells me otherwise, and if he does then that should not be because you keep creeping in with snide comments on the side."

She sighed as if a heavy burden had been placed on her head and Martin stepped up to her resting his hands on her shoulders.

"I am a good woman Forrest, at least give me the benefit of the doubt."

Forrest smiled at her and nodded his head in respect before leaving the room, placing a small jewellery box on Martin's table.

"He won't let me off the hook easily will he?" She sighed into his chest. Martin laughed and hugged her tight.

"His intentions are pure and he has been a part of this family for very a long time. In time he will see that you are just as awesome as I think you are."

"And until then?" She asked him and he regretted the weariness in her voice.

"I will take care of it, my love. Don't let it frustrate you, because he really means well and I will never treat you as if I suspect you of some horrible crime."

She sighed again and pointed to the jewellery box. "What's that?"

He opened it and tears glistened at the corner of his eyes. "It is one of my father's brooches. The one he used to wear every day."

Emily smiled up at him. "At least you know he is here with you. And why isn't your mother here?"

He pinched her cheeks. "We love each other far better from a distance. She will visit at some other time, but on this your special day I didn't want her being the melodramatic mother she always seems to be and besides, she made it quite clear that she could not come for such an impromptu event."

He saw sadness in her eyes and decided to twirl her around the room in a music-less dance to get her mind back on what was truly important. The fact that they were getting married to each other in a matter of hours, meant that their great adventure together would soon begin.

* * *

It was an autumn wedding in the late afternoon. The area faced the breath taking sunset and at the end of each seated aisle, jasmine scented candles hung from naked tree branches. It was a tear jerking sight with white rose petals scattered across the vast expanse of the lawn. Spread down the aisle was white leaves, as far as the eyes could see, slightly moist so they wouldn't crack when they were walked on and on each seat were two roses, one red and one black. Emily did not even bother asking Sara where she got black roses from.

"Isn't it lovely?" Sara asked her and she couldn't speak. All she could do was hug her while Jenny rubbed her back. Never before in her life had she ever thought an occasion so grand would be held in her honor. When people started trickling in moments later, Emily was surprised to find there was not a single free seat left and when her Aunt Josy showed up with a basket of treats for the reception table, Emily's tears could not be restrained.

"Before I even make my way down that aisle I just want to tell all of you thank you for being here," Little Jake who played with the long trail of her wedding gown was the first to kiss her on the hand and she bent to rub her nose against his.

"Soon you will have a house full of your own tiny tots," Jenny said.

Emily stopped breathing for a moment. “Let me just get through this wedding first before you start making a mommy out of me.”

They chatted for what seemed like too long, and when the music started up she took a deep breath. Hers was to be a wedding without the usual entrails of bridesmaids and groomsmen and she was happy about that. At least she would not have to be forced to select people she really didn’t know for her bridal party.

“Are you ready?” Lenard asked her coming to stand at her side just before the music which would signal the start of the procession began. She found herself unable to speak yet again.

“Okay, okay Emily, you need to breathe... Can you do that for me?” Sara asked coming to stand beside her. Only a minute or two remained before her walk down the aisle and she was just as nervous as the first time she had been met him. There was no rational explanation for how nervous she was and she couldn’t find any no matter how hard she tried.

“I can breathe,” she finally said to her, “I just need a moment to soak all this in to calm down.”

Her two friends looked at her wide-eyed. “Okay take as long as you need.” But that was really not long enough and when they started to play the song that would signal her need to walk down the aisle she realized there was no getting used to or being ready for what she was about to do. This was going to be one of the biggest moments of her life and all she could really ask the Lord for was not to make her topple over herself as she made her way to Martin.

“Ready?” Sara asked her moments later.

“Look,” Jenny said when she hesitated to answer, “Everyone’s here and has a program. It’s about to start. I see Martin waiting at the end of the aisle and he’s just as nervous as you are. Do you really want to make him wait any longer? The poor thing is probably thinking you have changed your mind and he has been so worried all day.”

Emily mentally pulled up her bootstraps and smiled at them. “Take me to him,” she said to Lenard who promptly complied. When she stepped up to the door the priest came out and asked everyone to stand.

It was my turn! All eyes would soon be on me.

The flower girl, a daughter of one of the maids responsible for her big day, lined the path with red rose petals as the music began to play. Emily only took two steps out before she was greeted by Martin’s face eagerly waiting for her.

“He looks like he might have peed himself a little,” Lenard joked trying to get her to laugh. It worked and her nervousness faded into the background of her mind as she made her way to the man who was to be the one she shared the rest of her life with. Lenard escorted her down the aisle, which seemed longer than before. He became her strength and she knew that without him she would probably faint. The guests looked at me, taking mental photographs of my dress, waving at her and smiling, one thing was for sure... no one made a sound.

Up ahead she saw him, Martin stepped forward to meet her. Her future husband, the love of her life, the man who would soon become her everything. He stood taller, his shoulders back and his eyes taking in everything about her. Beneath his gaze her soul warmed and beside him she saw Forrest smile, this time it was a smile that reached his

eyes and he nodded his head yet again in respect to her. She was sure that he too would soon become one of her best friends. If she wasn't mistaken she could have sworn tears filled his eyes, but before she could double check she was again aware of the gravity of the moment. Unlike him, her nerves kicked in ten-fold again. The attention felt like too much for her to handle, and she was happy she only had ten more steps to go.

At the end of the aisle Lenard hugged her. "I 'm proud of you," he said and then presented her to the groom. He placed her hand in Martin's and smiled. As a couple, they both stood in front of the priest. Before Lenard walked away, he patted Martin on the shoulder. That was his way of welcoming him into their extended family. Standing next to her love she felt overwhelmed.

Then the priest began his address and she knew there was no backing out of it now. Not that she would want to.

"True marriage begins well before the wedding day, and the efforts of marriage continue well beyond the ceremony's end," the priest was saying. "A brief moment in time and the stroke of the pen are all that is required to create the legal bond of marriage, but it takes a lifetime of love, commitment, and compromise to make marriage durable and everlasting. Today you declare your commitment to each other before family and friends. Your yesterdays were the path to this moment, and your journey to a future of togetherness becomes a little clearer with each new day."

Most of everything else he said was a blur to her as all she saw in front of her was the face of the man she was falling in love with ever more with every moment that passed. His suit, a white mirror to her dress and his grey eyes piercing her soul yet again. She was enthralled

in him and nothing else. The priest had to tell her it was time for her to recite the vows she had written twice before she heard him and pulled herself away from the depth of his eyes.

"I promise to be your lover, companion and friend," she began. "Your partner in parenthood, your ally in conflict, your greatest fan and your toughest adversary. Your comrade in adventure, your student and your teacher. I will be your consolation in disappointment and your accomplice in mischief. This is my sacred vow to you, my equal in all things. All things." She slipped the small gold wedding band onto his finger and smiled up at him.

His voice croaked a bit as he spoke next. "I promise to encourage your compassion, because that is what makes you unique and wonderful. I promise to nurture your dreams, because through them your soul shines. I promise to help shoulder our challenges, for there is nothing we cannot face if we stand together. I promise to be your partner in all things, not possessing you, but working with you as a productive part of our union. Lastly, I promise to you perfect love and perfect trust, for one lifetime with you could never be enough. This is my sacred vow to you, my equal in all things."

He slipped the ring on her finger as a tear slipped from her eye and behind him Forrest tried to stifle a sniffle but she caught it and smiled.

The priest nodded and asked, "If anyone objects to the union of this man and woman, speak now or forever hold your peace".

As assumed, no one said a word. "With the power invested in me by the State of Minnesota, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Martin leaned in and kissed her softly and they savored the moment as their very first kiss, before he pulled away and kissed her forehead. Everyone cheered, however she barely noticed; her full attention rested on Martin for in that moment nothing else was more important than he was.

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CHAPTER 7

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The next week passed by in a happy blur. She enjoyed Jenny's company, saw Little Jake's first steps, bonded even more with Sara and played diplomat to the kitchen staff whom her Aunt Josy kept bossing around. When she piled them all in two carriages a month later to go back to their lives, she could not keep the tears in. They all promised to visit her as often as they could and Sara said she would be back if they had a job for her. Martin promised she could work in any of his businesses and stay with them as long as she wanted but she was not used to such charity and promised she would be back if and when she could find another place to stay as reasonable as the one she now had.

It was a sad day to see them go, but Martin didn't leave her alone long enough for her to get herself too down about it. He took her to work with him every day and between their laughs and long discussions, she met more people than she could remember off hand, and learned so much about the businesses than she ever thought he would include her in. She was happy and she fell more in love with him with each passing day.

"Are you okay?" Forrest asked her one evening as she sat in the foyer sipping a glass of wine and watching the sun set over the mountains.

She patted the seat next to her. "I am okay, and how are you doing?"

He smiled at her. "I owe you an apology. You are everything I have ever hoped he would find in a wife and I am sorry I insulted

your humble beginnings to start with.”

“I have already forgiven you Forrest. I know you meant no harm.”

His breathing eased a bit and she could feel him relax. That was where they sat in silence until he excused himself to bed and she followed soon after. When she crawled in beside a sleeping Martin, he informed her that the following week he had forgotten that he had agreed to host his friend and ex-fiancé, Elena, at the house while her parents visited. She had recently lost her husband and the place she now lived with her children was no big enough to accommodate them all. It was a huge commitment that Emily would have preferred they spoke about before he had agreed. Nevertheless, she gave him a kiss and snuggled up to him to sleep. They could discuss it come morning... or at least that was the plan.

It didn't quite work out that way and before she knew it, it was a week later and Elena whom she had only met briefly once while they were in town, was moving in for a week-long stay with her mother.

“Ahhh Martin!” the elder woman named Cynthia, exclaimed as she walked into the house with a flourish. “You are still just as good looking as ever, what lovely babies you and my Elena would have bore.”

Emily did not dismiss the fact that the woman completely ignored her at his side to cast that double-edged compliment to her husband. She decided just then that she did not very much care for Cynthia and her fur coats. If the woman kept it up she would quickly demand they be placed in an inn where such insolence belonged. She glared at Marin who promptly introduced her.

“Cynthia meet my wife, Emily,” he said drawing her attention to her.

Cynthia looked her up and down and then with as much polite disdain as she could muster, she simply smiled at Emily. It came off more as a scowl and her words did not help. “Such a frail little thing you are. I thought women from the south were far more luscious.”

Emily felt like she had been slapped across the face, and the choice of adjectives did not make it any better. “And I believed women from the north to be more mannerable, but I guess we were both wrong.”

Emily smiled at the woman who did not expect to be responded to in such a way, beside her she could see Martin smile before he ushered in a maid to help the visitors get settled.

“I must apologize for my mother,” Elena said to her as she walked by, but Emily was seething too much to hear what was being said. When they were settled and dinner was had Emily let her discontentment be known.

“Her mother is the least courteous woman I have ever met. What kind of woman insults another in their own home?”

I am sorry,” Martin said trying to calm her down.

“No,” she fired back at him. “You do not get to apologize for this. The next time you are feeling generous you put them up in an inn. This was something you should have discussed with me before you agreed; I thought we spoke about everything.”

“This was something I had agreed to months ago and then when Elena’s husband died I thought it would be callous of me to turn them away.”

Emily wanted to hear nothing else he had to say and so she grabbed her night gown from the bed and headed to what was her room before they had gotten married.

“Em!” he called after her apologetically. She didn’t turn to respond; she simply closed the door behind her and got ready for bed. She would have to deal with Elena’s mother for an entire week and clearly the woman was not going to make it easy for her. All kinds of thoughts ran across her mind, the top of the list was whether or not Martin still had feelings for the woman he would have married before her. He had explained that they were just friends and he wanted to be there to support her, but even then his willingness to subject her to the cruel words of Cynthia was not okay with her. Had their roles been reversed she would have found another place for them to stay the moment Cynthia had disrespected him. But their roles were not reversed and so she went to bed trying to steel her mind against what she would have to endure for the rest of the week.

And the week did go by slowly and with her suffering every day. Martin managed to miss most of it as he went about his daily duties, and Forrest excused himself early every night. She was the hostess and so she had to stay, but on their last day there, Cynthia delivered a hefty blow. As Emily helped the kitchen staff to make one of her favorite pies the woman came around.

“Oh Emily dear it is so unbecoming of a woman now married and of your stature to be muddling around in the kitchen. You are no longer house help you need to stop behaving like one or you might

find yourself out of a husband.”

Emily could not believe her ears, she had suffered enough from this woman’s tongue and would have suffered even this in silence, but the insult to her staff was enough for her. “Cynthia, I am going to have one of our girls help you to pack up your things and you will spend the remainder of your trip in the inn on the other side of town. I believe we have been very generous, but your inhospitable manner is making it rather hard to have you here. Not only have you insulted me every chance you could, but you have treated my staff as if they were slaves. That is not something I am willing to accept anymore. Please be ready to leave within the hour.”

Emily did not wait on a response, she simply walked passed the woman with her head held high and went about her business. She went to her room and flopped down on the bed, willing her tears not to fall; Cynthia would have won if they did. An hour later when she came down, she was just in time to see the woman being whisked away.

“Well done!” Forrest said coming to stand by her. “I wanted to put her out in the cold the day she got here.”

But she was not as happy as he was, she did not like the idea of being mean and cold to others, that was not how she wanted to live her life. For the remainder of the day she closed herself off in the library and read away her sorrows. It was late evening before Martin came home and scoured the mansion trying to find her.

“You have been hiding from me,” he said, sitting on the floor beside her and nudging her playfully.

“Don’t ever invite someone into our home without first asking me if it is okay, and you will never allow them to stay again if they disrespect me or the people who work for you,” she said firmly to him, not giving him a chance to speak of anything else. “If this is to be my home then that needs to be understood.”

“I am sorry,” he said and kissed her forehead. “It was really not something she wanted to hear, but she accepted it nonetheless.

“I hear tell that you haven’t eaten, do you want me to bring you some food?” he asked bending beside her to rest a kiss on the top of her head. She turned her cheek to him and patted it with her hand, indicating that she wanted another kiss. He obliged with a smile and again told her he was sorry.

“Are you happy here, Emily,” he asked, with concern lacing his every word.

“You have no idea just how happy I am,” she said and she meant every word of it. “Have I given you reason to doubt that?” she asked him.

“It’s just that I see you drift off in solemn thought sometimes and I worry that I am not making you happy.”

She pulled him down to her eye level and spoke clearly so he could hear. “I am happier than I have been in a long time and I will always be happy with you. I love you, and I love the life we are making together. Sometimes I miss Texas and other times I just wished Sara was here so we could talk about girly things, but I am happy. This week was a hard week, but I am happy, as long as I am with you.”

She pecked him on the cheek as he smiled and left her to her book. The minute the door to the library closed, she clutched the book to her chest, took a deep breath and smiled.

He threw it open again. "And you can talk to me about girly things too!"

She laughed as he left her to her musings. She made her way to the sofa, and opened the window. The music playing in the distance softly floated around to the library while she stretched out on the couch and opened the book she had intended to read, but her mind kept wandering to what had just transpired, reliving every moment of it. She felt nothing but love for this man and she expected they would have their squabbles, but even then she was comfortable here, and she hadn't told him yet, but the child she was carrying would be just as happy too. With that thought, she let the music lull her to sleep.

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CHAPTER 8

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Emily woke in the morning to find that she had been carried up the stairs, stripped down and placed in her bed. It was a tad bit scary to find that she had not felt herself being moved at all, and worse being taken out of her clothes. She had heard that the mythical powers of great love could do this to a person, but had not experienced it until now. It was an amusing thought in and of itself

She rolled over in her bed intending to go back to sleep, it was after all Sunday morning and there was no great haste to wake up. But as she rolled over her eyes fell on a most beautiful sight. A small bouquet of red and black roses waited on her pillow with a note. The roses had droplets of water on them so she knew they must have been placed there within the hour, and she was again startled that she had not heard her visitor come or go, but as she pulled the note opened she smiled

“Your lips were supposed to taste like forbidden fruit, bidding me leave to a foreign land and never return.

Yet, every breath that exchanged between our urgent mouths tasted limitless.”

- Anonymous

She smiled at how poetic it was and tried to remember if she had read it somewhere, but couldn't. She did not miss the subliminal meaning to the message and she smiled at its realization. She had been right about him; Martin did know how to romance a woman when he was ready. This adventure that was to be their lives was just

getting started and she looked forward to what it might mean. She didn't miss the fact too that he had placed her in her own bed for the night and not in their matrimonial bed. She loved that he respected the fact that she had chosen to sleep away from him and the choice as to when she returned should be hers. It was warming to say the least.

She fell asleep again staring at the petals and wondering if there was any particular meaning to the number of black and red roses in the bouquet. She had heard somewhere that every bouquet combination had a deeper meaning and in particular where roses were concerned.

A soft rap came on her door later and she smiled as soon as she heard her husband ask if he could come in. Today was the day she would tell him the glorious news, and hoped that he would be as happy about it as she was.

"Come in," she called, her voice still a bit husky from sleep and as the door opened she looked at the man she loved carrying a tray of food. Sometimes she had to stop and wonder when she had gone from liking him to loving him, but the answer was always clear, every day that they had spent together up until Cynthia's arrival was a day she had loved him. The days following that had been spent doubting both their decisions, but even then she knew all marriages faced their own little storms and she was not willing to let that define them. Besides, he had made it up to her in immeasurable ways.

"Good morning sunshine," his perky voice ran any sleep she had remaining, right out of the building. "Ooh, I see you have an admirer. Who do you have sending you bouquets in our home?" he teased.

"Well, some wonderful stranger has decided to rid my mind of all

the evil things of the pass few days and give me something wonderful to wake up to. I think I shall marry him once I have found his identity out,” she said playfully.

“That would be signing his death certificate. I would challenge him to a duel for your love,” he hopped around the room pretending to have a sword and jabbed at the air in vivid imagination. Much to her delight he even pretended to lose. She looked at him yet again and felt nothing but love for the man who stole her away from herself.

“Eat up,” he said moments later, coming to pick from her plate. “You will need your strength if you are to watch me duel to the death.”

“And I will need to keep my strength up for your child that I am carrying inside me.” That stopped him in his tracks and he looked at her in shock.

“Yes,” she responded and he hopped around again in joy, dashing out of the room moments later to tell Forrest and the entire household the news. She listened to the joyous screams that rang out around the house and couldn’t help but laugh at the joy her baby was already bringing to the household, and it had yet to even be born.

“I love you,” he whispered against her lips moments later as he walked back into the room to where she sat munching enthusiastically on the food he had brought her. “I love you so much.”

She pulled him into her, inhaling the scent he wore that she had become so familiar with. The scent that soothed her each day, feeling his heart beat against hers and realized that of all the things she had wished for in her life, she had been granted all in one go. A husband

to love and be loved by, a house to call her own, a family who would always be there and now a child she would carry into this world. She had only one more prayer to give, and that was one of gratitude for the things she had and for the things she knew she would be blessed with.

That day after she managed to tear herself away from a reluctant Martin, who did not want her out of his sight, she sat and she penned letters to Sara, Lenard and Jenny. It was an invitation to come be with her during her last stages of pregnancy, so they could be there for the birth of the child she knew they would love. While Martin worked she did what any expectant mother would do, stayed home and thought of baby names while trying to decide how she would redo the nursery. In the end she decided that it was a decision she would make with her husband.

“Congratulations,” Forrest said behind her as she flipped through the books on the small bookshelf in the nursery. “I had long since given up on hearing the laughter of children running through the halls of this house.”

“You had given up all hope that Martin would have come home alive?” she asked him.

“No,” he said walking into the room to stand beside her. “I had given up all hope of him finding a woman worthy of carrying his child, but you prove my fears unfounded almost every day.”

She turned to him. “There is a sadness about you Forrest, a sadness that I am almost certain is not your own. Will you tell me someday what it is about?”

He smiled at her and turned to leave the room. “Maybe one day I won’t have to.”

It was an ominous and cryptic departing from a space that would soon house her most prized possessions and she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to leave it alone and she didn’t want to pry. As with all else she decided to speak to Martin about it once he got home.

* * *

CHAPTER 9

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Martin heard the request to see him, before he saw the person doing the requesting. “Let her come,” he said to the secretary who had been busy overseeing his father’s businesses, along with Forrest who had taken a week off.

“Martin,” Elena said walking into his small office at the back of the drugstore. “Thank you for seeing me.”

He nodded his head in acknowledgement, but then waited for her to speak. He was still a bit upset that he had taken it upon himself to offer her mother a place to stay, but she had failed to rein the woman in.

“How can I help you Elena?”

She sighed and stepped up to him. “I have loved you for a long time and I thought you had died in the war, but now you are home...”

“Tread light my dear,” he warned her for the words coming out of her mouth were not words she should be saying to a married man.

“All I am saying is that I had loved the fact that we were becoming friends, and since the mishap with my mother you have been distant. Why is that when the fault was not my own?”

He motioned for her to take a seat as a solitary raindrop made its presence known on his window pane. Winter was fast approaching and he had been planning to get home before the rain started in. Such

an attempt would no longer be feasible.

“The fault may not have been your own, but you did very little to stop your mother while she walked about my house disrespecting my wife in my absence. Had I known the extent of it you both would have been put out from the second day. But my wife decided to try and make it work, the least you could have done was assisted.”

“Have you met my mother, Martin?” Elena asked in her own defense. “She is a woman of strong convictions-“

“And clearly they were that the woman I love more than life itself was not worthy of my love. Tell me Elena, is that how you feel too?”

The woman paused before answering and Martin had to promise himself to be a gentleman and to prevent himself from asking her to leave.

“I believe Emily to be a woman of great virtue and I am happy you found the one you will love until your dying day. I respect her and she has been nothing but helpful and sweet the entire time I was there. All I am asking is that you do not make what my mother did spoil our friendship.”

“And why is my friendship so important to you when my love clearly was not?” He felt suspicion creeping up his spine and thought something was amiss.

“I was a naive woman who made a mistake in how I handled our being apart, but that does not mean you were not important to me. I have grown Martin and in that time I have realized that good friends are one of the most important things in this world, and you have been

that and more over the years. I am asking for an opportunity to remedy what might have been broken.”

He thought on her words for a minute and then replied. “That decision is not mine. I will allow you to apologize to my wife and from there she can decide whether or not she is willing to have you be a part of our lives. I can tell you right here and now that there is no way you can be my friend and not hers. I will not tolerate it.”

“And she will not tolerate me,” Elena said dejected. Martin could sense that she felt alone in the world, having lost a husband and she really never did have many friends, but he would never dishonor Emily ever again.

“Well, the choice is hers, so I suggest you have dinner with us and let her decide.”

Elena complied albeit reluctantly, and the carriage ride to the mansion was one of deafening silence. When he entered the house he could hear Emily singing beautifully as she set the dinner table for the two of them. He watched her from the doorway, amazed at the fact that this humble woman, who even helped the staff with their chores, was his wife. He prayed that no harm came to her and that her ways would be passed on to their children and the generations to come.

Feeling his eyes on her she turned and smiled at him “how long have you been standing there?” she asked, meeting him half way with a kiss.

“Long enough,” he said, and he knew she could tell that something was up.

“What is wrong?”

“Elena!” he called and the woman stepped around the column to the dining room. He watched the glow from Emily’s eyes fade and anger took its place. “She came to apologize.”

He could tell his wife was not particularly interested and he hoped she wouldn’t kick Elena out at second glance, but he also would not stop her.

“My mother was wrong for behaving how she did while she was living under your roof, and I know you won’t get an apology from her, so I came to give you one myself.”

“Tell me Elena,” Emily said turning her back to the woman to continue with her duties. “Did you come here of your own accord or did my husband demand that you do?”

Martin closed his eyes and said a prayer for Elena. He had never seen Emily so upset before, but he knew that when her limit had been reached, sympathy would be a hard thing to get out of her.

“Admittedly, he had to convince me to come,” the woman said.

“So why then should I believe there is any substance to your words?”

Elena stepped up to her and Emily stopped to give the woman the attention her advance was demanding and Martin found himself forgetting to breathe for a moment.

“I have loved Martin since we were children, and over the years his friendship became one of the best things that has ever happened to

me. I nearly ruined that with the decisions I made and that is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life, but the fact that he is and has always been an exceptional friend has not changed,” Elena paused. “And to be honest I could use a friend or two these days.”

“So now we are to be friends? Or are you just appealing to my soft side to get on my husband’s good side?”

“I am sorry,” Elena said as tears swam in her eyes. “This was a mistake.”

As she turned to leave, humiliation gleamed in her eyes, but Emily stopped her. “I am not being hard for no reason Elena. I believe in forgiveness and I have already forgiven you, but I will not be used to achieve any ulterior motives no matter how well intended they are.”

Martin watched as Emily let go of the woman’s arm and used her soft hand to cup her face. “I know what it is like to need a friend, and I will be a friend if you are willing to be one as well, but I will not ever tolerate being disrespected again.”

Elena sighed and smiled. “I am truly sorry for what happened.”

“Enough apologizing, just do better,” Emily said hugging the woman. “While you work on that dinner is almost ready and I would love for you to stay.”

Martin once again stood in awe of the woman he had married and he knew in that moment that no matter what winds would blow, there would be no one who could ever take her place in his life. With her,

he could see himself becoming a better human being and that was after all what life was truly about.

He hugged her from behind, resting a palm over her stomach. “I am looking forward to a lifetime with you,” he whispered in her ear.

* * *

EPILOGUE

* * *

It had only been a couple weeks since Sara had left but Emily missed her terribly. She had been hoping she would visit, but she had not. All the time she had taken away from work at the diner must have caught up with her. She worried about the woman, but knew there wasn't much she could do. Instead, she wrote her a letter demanding she visit on the weekends and telling her of her pregnancy.

“Do you think she is okay?” Martin asked over her shoulder.

“With Sara you never know.”

He sighed. “If she wants to stay with us she can, you know this,” he added.

Emily turned to kiss him and he rested a gentle hand on her stomach that was slowly extending. “I know and I will remind her.”

He walked away and she watched him take her heart with him. She really did love this man.

* * *

Sara stood by the window reading the letter Emily had sent her and she smiled with tears of joy. When would her past ever stop haunting her long enough for her to have this kind of love and abundance? Every day she woke with the fear that someday the evil she had run from would catch her and every night she went to bed praying it would not, but the one thing she had learned in life was

that what was meant to be would be.

She hated this town, and the only joy she had gotten was when Emily had entered her life, but she knew she couldn't depend on her friend to bring her happiness, which would never last very long. She read the letter again, before penning one that she would visit the following week. That visit might be her last for a while, because she could feel the winds of change blowing her right out of Minnesota. She only hoped that wherever it took her it would be away from danger and into the arms of love.

"What are you moping about now?" Aunt Josy disrupted her thoughts.

"I'm just pondering on my life," she said, turning back to the shelf the woman had asked her to help stock. Most people who didn't know her well enough often thought she was just a nosy old woman who was slowly losing her eyesight, and Sara had to admit that had it been a few months ago, she would have avoided the woman like the plague. Now, they had come to understand each other and she was looking forward to being in her life.

"I know you have things you don't speak of Sara," the woman said patting her back. "Just remember that what you have done in the past has absolutely no bearing on your future and you can make that future into anything you want it to be."

Little did Aunt Josy know that the things she did not speak of haunted her every day. Even now looking across the street she was looking at one of such things in a tailored three piece suit with a tooth pick in his mouth. No matter where she went, they always seemed to find her... The winds of change were blowing for sure and she would

soon be riding them out of town.

* * *

BRIDES OF HOPE & DESTINY

3

LONELY BRIDE PROMISED TO HER BOUNTY HUNTER

PROLOGUE

* * *

1902 Alabama

Zeb sat by his window looking out at the dusty Alabama streets, wondering when his prey would make an appearance. He had been waiting all day in the motel by the wayside and his vantage point had brought to the forefront many a happenings. He had seen the woman across the road and the lover she was having an affair with skitter about when her husband had come home earlier than she expected. It had been quite a comedy show, better than any he had watched at the theatre back home he loved to frequent. He was really missing home and even more so his son, who he hated to leave.

He had promised him that this would be his last sojourn across the country and he intended it to be his last because he was most certainly tired of running down evasive debtors and criminals. When he had retired from being a US Marshall, he had missed the joys of travel, but at forty years old, he was quickly growing tired of the constant trips away from home to track down sweaty and cursing men or conniving women who cursed more than he liked to hear- all this while his son was being raised by the head maid of his plantation in the Washington hills. This was not how he envisioned the rest of his life to play out, and he had just about had enough of it.

What he wanted was a wife to grow old with and a mother for his son, and maybe just maybe, he would be blessed with another child. His attention turned from the road to the mail order bride advertisement he was to be placing in the papers across several states. As a man who travelled he was sure he would not be satiated by a

small town girl from the Washington hills and he wanted a woman with a different kind of upbringing. For that he would search far and wide for a wife worthy of being a part of the estate he had amassed over the years and even more so, a mother to the son he treasured more than life itself.

A knock sounded on his door and he quickly stuffed the finished ad into his pocket. "Come in!" his deep voice echoed around the room.

"Is he in yet?" Jerry, his partner asked. He shook his head at the scrawny man who didn't look much like he'd be able to fend for himself, though was an important part of his operation. There was much to be said about judging a book by its cover and that idea applied to them both.

"Did you find anything of what he might be doing in town?" Zeb asked about the man they were trying to find. A three thousand dollar bounty was on his head and Zeb would not be denied his sixty percent of it.

"Yes," Jerry said shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "He has an illegal moonshine business going on and has taken to running a brothel. Word on the streets is that he also frequents the woman across the way and so more than likely he would be showing up soon."

Zeb nodded in acknowledgment to the information and fell into a brooding silence. He really just wanted to find this man wanted by the law in several states and collect his money and head home to his son.

"So have you decided what you are going to do about your perpetual loneliness that has you moping around?" Jerry asked him.

Zeb was in no mood to talk about the obvious, but despite his surly outward demeanour he really was a kind man who appreciated the friendship he had built with this unlikely fellow years ago.

“Mail order bride,” he said curtly, not wanting to discuss his decision. But he should have known that would not deter Jerry.

“Are you sure you want some woman from some place you don’t know raising your child and carrying another one? What if she is a psychopath and passes that trait down to your children?”

He rolled his eyes at the much expected melodramatic statement and turned his attention back to the streets. “If they turn out to be such it is a good thing I will have the skills necessary to hunt them down to the ends of the earth.”

“Ooh, cold,” Jerry mocked, though Zeb knew that if it came down to it, he would never harm his wife or child. Pummelling the reluctant he went after was a necessary evil, but it most certainly was not a natural instinct by which he did so. He had come very close to it in Mississippi some months ago when a woman he later found out was called Jenny, had gotten caught in the cross fire. It was a fact that had been weighing on his conscience and he was hoping maybe one day he could apologize to her, but for now...

His catch had just arrived for his evening rendezvous with the mistress across the way.

“Is that him?” Jerry asked, following his line of sight.

Zeb looked at the portrait of the man and then at the gentleman looking all dapper entering the house ahead of them. “I do believe so,”

he said.

“Let’s go get him and go home then,” Jerry said eagerly, and Zeb couldn’t agree more. They had been on the road for a very long time and he’d had enough of it all, but even if he captured this man now, he would still be on the road for a few more weeks.

As he left the motel he gave the young boy sitting on the stairs a dollar bill to place his advertisement in the newspaper and by telegram to the papers in several other states, and promised him more money if he hurried back. The boy ran off in eagerly and Zeb turned his attention back to the bounty he was about to collect.

“Who will I get drunk with after you get married?” Jerry said in mock despair.

“Some hapless old soul along the wayside is always up for a cold drink,” he laughed. “Don’t worry old friend, you will never be alone in a saloon where alcohol is served.”

“Well we will have to drink our way home after this last haul,” Jerry said before they knocked on the door.

Zeb would most certainly do that, for in another month or two, he hoped he would be a retired bounty hunter and instead, a happily married man with another child on the way.

* * *

CHAPTER 1

* * *

1902 Minnesota

There are many things that can be said about life; the truest of them would be that it is a pain in the derriere. Yes, it's a gift... a sweet precious gift. Yes, it's a blessing, a magnificent blessing. Yes it's a... well Sara ran out of pros here so back to the original point.

Life is such a bother.

No wonder there are some who prefer to deal with the dead.

As the crows cawed and the dried leaves rustled across the cracks in the concrete path winding its way through the cemetery, these were the thoughts going through her head. It wasn't death that so many feared that caused all the pain, it was life. An argument could be made that both had their merits and so the zombies and vampires or the horror tales some told made death a scary thing, as one ate human flesh and the other drank human blood. But the undead obviously wasn't the answer either. Hanging in limbo aside, the sweet bliss of death had lots more allure.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled and the wind suddenly got colder, the trees swayed as dead spirits blew through sending chills to her core. Spooky...

This is a cemetery, what do you expect?

Sara pulled her jacket tighter and made her way to the tombstone where she found her goods stashed. Five hundred dollars and a fresh

load of moonshine to sell. Another day, another dollar... this was her life since she had run from her Alabama hometown. She had had a brief reprieve from it all the day she had met Emily, but now Emily was happily married to Martin, the love of her life she had found through mail order and she was here trying to hide her sinister side job from the eyes of the upstanding citizens of Minnesota. At least she could pay her rent and eat for another week. She had come here hoping to find peace, quiet and a decent way to make her living, but she had found the people of Minnesota to be suspicious of her as a newcomer.

She had wondered if maybe she just looked like the sort that wasn't worth trusting and had spent countless hours in the mirror trying to figure it out, but had found herself to be no different than the others around her. Emily had been nice to her and she missed her. Though they saw each other very weekend, and she certainly didn't mind taking the three hour carriage ride to see her, she still missed her. Now she was pregnant with her first child and it had her thinking about her own life.

Would she ever find a man who would love her?

Would she ever be able to settle down and have children? Would she ever have a full life? Or would the demons from her past always haunt her? She hoped peace was in her future and she prayed that was soon. She sat down in the damp grass beside the grave and spoke like she always did to the little boy that lay beneath it.

"Hello Fin. How's another day in the afterlife?" She waited then solemnly added, "the present one is far from kind!"

She ran her hand through the wet dirt and took an origami flower

she had made and placed it against his tombstone.

“Some days I feel like I just want to die, but death much like sleep doesn’t seem to like my company much.” Sara continued speaking to the tombstone of the little boy name Fin Daubney, who was just but six when he died in 1854. She always thought it must have been death by cholera, tuberculosis or some other disease that had ravaged towns the decades before she had been born, and felt sorry for the people who had been so ill prepared for fighting disease and sickness back then. “I hope you enjoy my company because I enjoy yours.” She finished.

She took another origami, this one of a dragon and placed it on the equally aged but well weathered tombstone next to Fin’s. It was dragon because the epitaph spoke to a fierce spirit laying there. Ellis Draco Daubney, it read, *‘wife and mother of gallant spirit’*. For such an inscription only a dragon could do justice. She had always assumed that Fin’s mother lay there and by the time of their deaths she may have died of what he had or even worse; a mother’s broken heart. She didn’t much believe in all the hocus pocus that came with death but she always smiled knowing that they lay side by side.

“And you dear mother, I hope the talker I imagine him to be isn’t running you red in the face in the great beyond.” She ran her hand through the Earth there and imagined what the woman must have looked like. This was Minnesota and so she imagined her to be an aristocrat. Back then commoners did not have fancy graves with tombstones built to survive the ages.

Yes, she must have been from noble blood.

She smiled once again at the people she imagined smiled back at

her and made her way back in the direction she had come. As she passed where her boyfriend's tombstone rested, she felt angered and cheated, his death had broken her heart but he had left her all his troubles which had hit her in surprise. A large critter ran behind her disturbing the ominous silence of the graveyard and she turned away before the fright could consume her and looked about, deciding to leave before she ran into any trouble.

“no, no, no!” she shouted and lifted the folds of her frock and ran through the eerie black gates with the winged serpent glaring at her as if reprimanding the loud pattering her feet made in the reverent muteness of the dead. She would lose her side job if she was late. Stepping through the autumn leaves that scattered the streets with a purpose, she made her way back to the diner where she earned a meager living.

“Just in time,” her ratty looking boss snared at her. The beads of sweat that pooled on his forehead gave the impression that he actually worked. Well, yes he did. He worked very hard at making their lives a living hell. She didn't even respond to him as she had learned that that only earned her his ire, and so she side-stepped his hideously elongated form, with his beady eyes and flushed face staring back at her.

When she had first met him he had frightened her, but it wasn't his looks that had done that, it was his mean and horrific personality. She had seen him gaze lovingly at the chef once and that answered the question of why she always got favors; it also made it clear that though he could very likely be a naturally born disgruntled man he was more likely over compensating for his appearance. It was hard for people to be mean to you if you set the precedence of being mean to them first.

“You are working in section A!” he shouted at her before disappearing and she seethed. The diner was one of the largest and most upscale eating establishments on that side the town, and had been parcelled off into sections. The staff was to be rotated to allow them to make more money in tips as some sections attracted more customers than others. He was being spiteful to her, for what reason she had no clue. She had been working Section A for two weeks now. Had it not been for her extracurricular activities she would have been at her wits end.

She slammed her cupboard closed and angrily dressed in her uniform. The black skirt and top were too thin for the chill of the cool autumn air that blew in through the open windows. The staff had complained although management didn't seem to care. Tonight though, she was in no mood to freeze her rear end off to not make enough money to substantiate her time. She may be able to pay her rent but she had other inherited debts and if she couldn't make enough money by the end of the week, then her rent would have to be re-appropriated. These days it was always a case of food on the table and a roof over her head or death.

Life might be anything but nice and the afterlife had its appeal, but sadly she was not the only person dependent on her measly income.

The smell of smoke and the sound of jazz music flowed from the second floor where it entertained the customers who came only for the enjoyment of it and the alcohol, wafted into the welcome lobby as she took her stand at the door with hopes of stealing customers as soon as they walked in. The other servers had the same idea but tonight she was sure she had a lot more motivation than they did. She peered into the darkness to see what the other sections looked like and realized

that the others had a good start. It was Friday evening and the early after work crowd from North Street had already arrived and had made themselves comfortable. She felt depressed, not only had she been given the worst section, but she had also been given the worst shift.

She was really beginning to think the universe hated her... and she really missed Emily. She would be seeing her in a couple days.

As the others shuffled around in anticipation she turned her gaze back to the stairs outside the building at the woman who mounted them gracefully. She was of a petite build, but stately in demeanour. Her walk oozed calm authority and commanded attention and the coquettish flicker of her eye lashes entranced all those who looked at her.

She was known to be a big spender who hung around on Friday nights and always sat in the same seat in the corner of section A, smoking a cigarette. Often, a gentle man way younger than her would provide her company and many rumored she was his lover... an odd pair, but most of the people who frequented this spot had their own secrets. This evening she was alone and either way, a good tip would be paid.

The others stood back with envious looks at the once disheartened server who followed her patron at a distance and took her order as she sat.

“What is your name?” the woman asked.

“My name?”

“My name is your name?” The woman looked back at her in

amusement. “Whoever named you should be hung in the town square by their thumbs.”

“I’m Sara. Sorry, I was caught off guard.” Sara responded feeling like an idiot.

“What no one ever asked you your name?” The woman questioned with exaggerated disbelief.

“People who come here don’t usually care about who is serving them they just want you to get them what they ordered in good time and allow them to drop a few inappropriate lines at you if necessary. At the end of the night you get a tip often far less proportioned to the services you provided and move on to the next.”

“Sounds like prostitution.”

“I was once told we are all prostitutes of one thing or the other. It’s just that some forms of prostitution are more acceptable than others.”

The woman laughed a soft sweet melodious sound. “Don’t let your bosses hear you say that Sara.”

Sara smiled and turned to leave but before she could she was stopped in her tracks by a question.

“Sara, Sara. Do you know what your name means?” the woman asked crossing her legs and lighting a cigarette as she stared at the waitress who smiled, though in the dim glow of the lights around her it was obvious that her eyes held nothing but sadness. When nothing but a curious stare was given in response the woman continued. “War

goddess. So don't look so beaten."

The words echoed through Sara as she turned to fetch what the woman had ordered. *Don't look so beaten* the woman said. She prided herself on hiding her pain well but apparently not good enough. Sadly, it would take more than a few words of encouragement to change her situation and her broken resolve. A lot more.

"Day dreaming when you have customers waiting?" came the raspy whisper in her ears and she cringed at the tiny beads of saliva that landed on her neck as she stepped away.

"Clearly, I am waiting on my order." She retorted, motioning at the bartender who was to serve her the drink, the bartender who was taking his sweet, sweet time. She stared in defiance at the ratty face glaring at her, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that she would not be able to work there much longer. Slinging drugs was more inviting than harassment for such little pay. She just hoped this woman was as big a tipper as they said.

The bartender placed her drink on the counter and she hurriedly shoved pass the rodent to serve her guest.

"Well that was quick." the woman smiled appreciatively. "An evident difference in service."

"Don't feel too special," Sara responded. "I have no one else demanding my services." She waved at the empty section sitting behind the vibrantly occupied and busy foreground.

The woman smiled kindly at her. "Has no one ever told you it is quality and not quantity that makes all the difference?"

“Those people tend to have a wealth of both. Enjoy your drink.” Sara said and headed back to the front to see what else the cold winds would blow in. Her hope hung on the big spender, but the last few months working there had taught her that hope didn’t pay the bills and good plans meant nothing if you had no contingencies.

She tried and failed for the next fifteen minutes to land another customer. Maybe it was her unwillingness to try to outdo the others. She liked harmony, a fact that meant she would probably always suffer. Having suggested that they take turns seating guests, going in alphabetical order to make it fair for everyone only made sense, but the sharks preferred to fight for fresh meat and so she was left in the cold. Sara decided it was time for a break and went to check on her customer who smiled warmly at her approach.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

* * *

She spent the next twenty minutes thinking about what her life should be like and what she hoped it would be like once she made enough money to move away from this cold town. She had mulled it over time and time again and had even sent a few letters out; letters responding in the hopes of becoming a mail order bride. She had seen how well it had worked for Emily, and her kind friend Jenny who lived in Texas; she was hoping she might have the same luck.

Her current life was beginning to depress her, and she couldn't live forever on Emily's happiness. She wanted to love and be loved, even though love seemed about as likable as her surly boss. The same one who would make her life miserable if she didn't pay attention to her customers.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked the woman looking at the half empty bottle of Sherry Oak Whisky she had served her a short time ago. "Maybe some soup?" She added, concerned that the woman would soon topple over from the amount of alcohol in her system.

"I have a carriage waiting on me outside, so don't worry your pretty little head," the woman responded following her gaze to the bottle.

"Maybe you should get some food in you," Sara urged gently.

"Are you trying to get me to spend more money, or are you just concerned?"

More money hadn't crossed Sara's mind, but it was a good plan. "I would hate to see you emptying the contents of your stomach on the floor. Not only would it be embarrassing, it would mean I would have to clean it up. Add to that the fact that half the cost of this bottle could send me to early retirement. I would rather you not waste it like that. So some soup?"

The woman simply laughed. "You aren't very good at being a waitress are you?"

"I'm an excellent server though not a mindless puppet, and providing good conversation and excellent food advice is another one of those services I am expected to provide. I am simply doing my job."

"Mindless puppets? Is that how you see your peers?"

Sara looked back at where the others stood, eyes glued to the outdoors and occasionally flickering to their customers. Each prepared to crush the other to make the boss money, only to put very little of it into their own pockets. A slave to the trade, selling their souls for a shilling.

"Yes," she said. "They are mindless puppets."

The woman cocked her head to look at the sad face that smiled politely back at her and was intrigued by the way she spoke and the confidence with which she served. "Don't let your boss hear you. He would no doubt fire you."

"Well, I don't plan to be here very much longer," Sara said looking at the ratty man whose beady eyes threatened her from across the floor. "Definitely not."

“Well, in that case yes you can get me something else.” The woman ousted her cigarette and turned back to her. “The pleasure of your company while I drink.”

Sara was surprised. She was used to all kinds of people making passes at her, men and women alike but none have ever asked for her company in a tone that suggested nothing but. “You can have the pleasure of my company every fifteen minutes. I’m not trying to get fired tonight.” She responded.

The woman’s eyes flashed with anger and the force of it caused Sara to step back. This was obviously not a woman used to hearing the word, no.

“I will have that soup then,” the woman said and though the smile never left her face, her tone had lost the chatty playfulness it had before.

Sara walked off a bit confused but even more convinced this was not the job for her as people were just too temperamental. As she went to the kitchen to place the soup order she ran into trouble.

“We told you not to mess with us!” The husky man who had tried to kill her more than once said as he shoved her through the staff entrance and out into the cold where three other men stood waiting. She couldn’t make their faces out in the dark, but she knew who they were and the iron they held in their hands made their intentions clear.

“I’m not messing with you,” Sara shouted back as he shoved her over to the dumpster and away from the light, landing a punch to her abdomen. She was sure she heard a rib crack and as his other hand landed on her other side she was sure she was about to die.

“Please...” she uttered a cry for mercy, only cut short as he gripped her by the throat and lifted her from her feet slamming her against the side of the dumpster. She was sure she would die as her air supply was cut off.

“You owe us money.” He said, pulling her dangling ninety pounds of fear to his face so she would see he was not joking. “Where is it?” she clutched at his hand and he let her go. She crumpled to her knees in the dirty water that surrounded the dumpster and fought to breathe.

“I thought I had until tomorrow to make the payment,” she huffed as he roughly pulled her to her feet. “I will have it then just give me more time.”

“More time you say?” he laughed a deep guttural and sinister sound and punched her again and blood spewed from her mouth. “We want our payment at the end of the night, the next time you avoid our messages I will put you in the hospital, and even then I will still expect payment.”

They walked off and she took a moment to compose herself before walking painfully to the servers’ room to change her clothes. With every move she made she was in pain and she rested her forehead against her cupboard wishing she would just die. Every day of her life had been one painful day after another, but she had somehow always pulled through. For the past year it had gotten exponentially worse and all she was guilty of was falling in love with the wrong boy. He was dead and she had inherited all his troubles.

Life was not only a pain it was also very unfair. A tear escaped and she quickly brushed it away and made her way to the kitchen,

hoping the weird woman had not gotten upset and impatient though she had been away for no more than five minutes. She had not put in the order but saw a bowl of soup waiting to be collected and made off with it, not responding to the kitchen help's commands that it wasn't hers. When one tried to stop her the murderous look she gave him was enough to make him reconsider and so the door swung closed behind her with the word *bitch* floating in its swing.

Sara tried as best as she could to walk without giving away that she was in pain. A task that was harder than it seemed as she made her way through the crowded café as pain made its way to her wounded torso. By the time she got to her section she was about to double over, and her knees went weak when she saw the rat speaking to her customer. He turned to look at her and she saw nothing but anger in his eyes. He impatiently waved her over and she squared her shoulders and headed into the storm.

"The only person you will be serving for the rest of the night is this customer." He said sounding pleased and accommodating but his face was echoing pure anger. "Make sure she has no complaints at the end of the night." With that he stalked off and she gingerly placed the soup in front of the woman, and then stood to her side.

"Sit." The woman calmly commanded patting the seat next to her with concern. Sara looked at her questioningly and she insisted. Gingerly sinking to the seat she held her mid-section and rested her head against the back of the chair closing her eyes as her ribs throbbed. "What happened to you?"

"I walked into a wall." Sara replied. "What did you tell my boss?"

"I told him I would like the pleasure of your company for

conversation for the duration of my stay. He didn't argue."

"Because you spend money, but surely I will be fired at the end of the night."

"He won't fire you either, " the woman responded and Sara briefly opened her eyes to look at the face staring at her with unanswered questions. Sara knew she wouldn't ask them, she was a proper woman and these women knew better than to push.

"Right because you are a big spender who enjoys my company, see what I mean about prostitution?" Sara asked and closed her eyes again.

"Well there is very little money can't buy."

"The problem is not money, it's the people who have it, and they think they can bend anybody to their will with it. It is rather discomfoting that little people like me fall under that banner."

"I'm not paying you to stay," the woman said feeling offended. "I'm not paying him to make you stay either. I simply made a request he didn't deny."

"For reasons we both know. It's fine. I will be your friend for the night. I can't do much else currently anyway."

"Yes, so I see you stay by default. I'm a little insulted." They exchanged looks and the woman reached over to run her hand gently against the damaged ribs causing Sara to bolt up in painful surprise. "You have two broken ribs on each side, what a wall it must have been."

Sara looked at the woman as she poured a drink and passed it to her.

“Drink that, it will help with the pain.”

Sara didn't resist and downed it, enjoying the burning feeling of the whiskey as it cursed through her insides. “That was good.”

No response came.

“What is your name?” she asked the woman who had fallen into a quietness that was more pensive that she could understand.

“I am Adele,” the slow sultry voice answered her.

“You aren't from around here are you?”

Adele laughed. “It is so ironic that people automatically assume that. I was actually born in this town, but being a bastard child my mother knew I would have no hope of growing up here in peace so she moved someplace else and married a kinder Sir who took very good care of us.”

Sara nursed the bruise on her side for a moment and waited for Adel to continue but she didn't, and when she did finally begin to speak again, it was on a different note.

“Have you ever wondered about the merits of living Sara?” she asked.

Sara sighed and drank some more. “All the time, and I can barely count them on one hand.”

“Life isn’t that bad,” Adele laughed. Clearly the woman had no idea about the hell she was living in. “Life is mostly about the choices we make and how we go from there. I for one find it a mystery worth living to solve, but then I look at you and all I see is despair. You are depressing me.”

“Would you like me to leave then?” Sara asked, feeling a bit insulted.

Adele smiled. “No, I would like to know what it is you want out of life. I have a feeling we are more like than you know.”

She sighed before she answered the question, amazed to find this strange woman so easy to talk to. “I would like to pay off my debts, and then move to some far away land and marry a man who will love me and our children until our dying day.”

“Rather idealistic, isn’t it?” Adele asked.

“No, it is just simplistic. I believe I can be happy with very little, as long as I have no debts to pay and love, then I can be happy with whatever comes.”

Adele again went pensive before she unfolded the newspaper that she had been carrying. She turned the pages to a mail order bride advertisement and nudged Sara playfully. “I know the man who has written this, and I think you both would be suited for each other. Mull over the idea and then send him a letter, you might find fate waiting for you there.”

Sara read and reread the ad several times before conceding and when she had Adele got up to go but not before handing her a letter.

“I hear you are close friends with the Longmore family, can you please ensure their caretaker Forrest gets this note, please?”

She turned the letter over and over in her hand but there was no message on the outside to say who it was from. “Who should I say is the sender?”

Adele smiled down at her. “Tell him his daughter has finally decided she would like to meet him,” Adele said, and then she simply walked away.

Sara smiled. She and Emily had stayed up many long nights wondering why Forrest had this sadness about him that seemed incapable of allowing him the joy he so deserved, now she knew why.

“He will be a happy man to see you,” she said to Adele who stopped and turned to her in shock.

“Has he spoken of me?” she asked expectantly.

Sara smiled. “No, but the sadness he wears like an armor can only be because of one thing.”

Adele smiled. “Let’s hope I can ease the ache in his heart, as only he can fill the gap in mine.”

For the first time in a long time Sara felt the universe aligning and though it was yet again doing so for somebody else’s cause, she was elated. She picked the newspaper up from the seat and stored it along with her things as she changed and made her way home. She would respond to that ad, maybe, just maybe the stars would align for her too.

CHAPTER 3

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Zeb put a gag over the man he had captured for the sheer fact that his master plan was clearly to annoy his captors into letting him go. That might have worked had Zeb not decided that this one haul was to be his last. He was a legendary bounty hunter who never failed to set his employers grievances right. There was no way he was going to let this scrawny man get away from him. He pulled the gag tighter and secured him further onto the back of the horse he hauled alongside his. Just another hour up the road and he would be a retired man with the better part of a three thousand dollar haul.

"So what do you think unemployment will feel like?" Jerry asked him.

Zeb scuffed. "I won't be unemployed, I have a ranch."

"Yes, yes," Jerry bemoaned the fact that he had no such thing. "A ranch you keep reminding me that you used the money you've earned across the years to procure, and now you intended to live out the rest of your life there with the mistress whom you will marry very soon."

Zeb laughed at his obvious displeasure. "I told you to stop wooing women and to think about your future, Jerry. Life will not always be this. If you need work though, I will employ you as a stable hand."

Zeb threw a pebble at Zeb's head as they ambled along the beaten trail to the next town up the road. He could really use a bath and a hot meal. He knew Jerry was going to go find himself some lady company, but he had more thoughts of intimate fealty than of brothels

at the moment. He had after all, finally got a response to his mail order bride ad, while in the town before this. He had said nothing to Jerry who had laughed at his being upset with all the others he had gotten. He was in no mood to have the man laugh at this one too. After all, he was certain this, Sara, was the one to be his wife. There was just something about the raw honestly and subtle mockery she made of life and the prospect of love. He was sure to find she was a woman broken or a very smart and realistic one. The intrigue of uncertainty inoculated him. He would invite her to join him when he arrives in Minnesota, and then from there he would see if she was to be taken home as his bride to be.

They walked in silence to the town up the road where he promptly stowed his prisoner in the local jail and made his way to the motel across from it with a clear view of the outside of the cell. Not that the man could escape from the impressive strong hold unless he had help, but Zeb had learned that when people found themselves backed into a corner, they either cowered and died or came out swinging. He wasn't so sure what this annoyingly talkative man would do. Come morning the sheriff from the town over, to whom he sent a message to, would come to collect his prisoner and Zeb would be free of the burden.

"Zebron McAllister!" The matron hollered at him with joy as he entered her establishment. "It seems like a century since I last laid eyes on you!"

The woman wrapped him in a hug so warm he nearly melted. Her tiny frame pressed against his impressively lean, yet muscularly toned body, and he would have had stirrings of an intimate nature had their relationship not ran a long course years before. There used to be a time when he thought she was to be his, and then reality had slapped

that thought from his mind when he had met her best friend who later became his wife.

May God rest her soul... His heart wept for a moment for the love he had lost.

"Delilah," he whispered in her ear as he wrapped her in a hug. "It is nice to see that you haven't changed even the slightest little bit."

She pinched his cheeks and motioned him towards the bar, pouring him a glass of brandy to warm his soul.

"Okay, just ignore me!" Jerry shouted at them both. Their laughter made his flushed face go dark with anger and he walked over to Zeb and rudely plucked his glass from his hand as it was on its way to his lips.

"This one is getting married soon and you, Delilah, pretending I don't exist. You both go ahead and keep breaking my heart," Jerry's pseudo -anger was an amusing show for them both. Then as if in a delayed response, Delilah's smile disappeared into an inquisitive frown.

"Getting married?" She asked Zeb who ignored her and poured himself another drink.

"Yep. He is retiring come daylight and riding off into the sunset with a lady he doesn't really even know."

Delilah leaned across the counter and rested her head on her palm waiting for more information. "Who is she? Where is she from?"

He realized there was no way he was going to escape this

interrogation, and no way was he going to lie to his oldest friends.

"Her name is Sara," he began.

"Aha!" Jeremy jumped up in excitement. "I knew you had chosen one from the pile. I was no fool!"

Zeb laughed. "I simply didn't tell you because I didn't want you making fun of it, but she feels like the real deal."

They both heard the sincerity in his voice, and though he was sure Delilah wanted to drill him about whether or not he was over his wife's death, she did not. Instead his two oldest and dearest friends asked him things they needed to ask to ensure he was making the right decision. And so for the rest of the evening, Sara was the most important thing in their lives.

He spoke of her, telling them what little he knew of her from the letter she had sent. He hoped she would be what he was looking for, and he would be in Minnesota in less than a week and there he would find out.

"She sounds lovely," Delilah said. "Let us hope she can tend to children."

That was their only concern, for they knew his son Peter was his most prized possession.

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CHAPTER 4

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The letter in response to her own was a comforting reality and Sara found herself smiling more than usual as she read the letter that had been sent to her.

The words were soft and endearing and she could just hear the kind voice echoing in her head. Maybe this mystery woman did know a thing or two about romance. She reread it as she walked to the grave yard yet again to pick up what was to be hers. At the tombstone she found more money and a note that said the moonshine she sold on the side would be late. It was not a pleasing fact because she would have preferred to be making more money. Luckily, the strange woman called Adele, had tipped her enough to put a dent in the debt her ex-fiancé had left her with. She collected the cash and had her usual conversation with the dead that she had grown so fond of, and then she made her way to her tiny apartment located on the back of the house of an old woman.

It wasn't the best accommodations, and certainly didn't live up to what she was used to. In fact, she had been accustomed to far better. She had not been born into humble beginnings. Her father had been a wealthy land owner in Alabama, and her mother came from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the south. But envy had killed them both when her uncle thought what her family had should be his. He had ruthlessly taken from them their lives and then proclaimed himself ruler of the estate, fixing his eye on marrying her off to some rich old man who smelled of garlic. She wanted no part in that, and so as soon as she had been old enough, she took what riches she could

and left home.

He had search for her for years and still had men tailing her, so she learned not to take comfort in any one place or person for too long. That is how she knew her time in Minnesota was drawing to a close. The debt collector who was sent to fetch what the man she had fallen in love with owed, would have to be paid before she could leave. It is not that he held her prisoner, but no matter where she went he always seemed to find her and she was tired of nursing the bruises he left behind. He was a man who took no pity on women like her. He was the kind of man who would bury her alive if it meant collecting a debt owed to him. She would not risk him following her into her new life, especially if she found Mr McAllister a favorable man. She would miss Emily if she left, but as she made her way to the carriage that would take her to see the only friend she had ever had, she knew she couldn't stay. Hot on the heels of the debt collectors would be the bounty hunters her uncle had sent after her.

It was shortly after dusk that she pulled up to the Longmore mansion where Forrest, the caretaker, opened the door for her.

"Sara!" He greeted her gleefully. "We thought you might have abandoned us this weekend."

"Never," she replied rushing up the cobblestoned staircase and into his arms as he rushed her out of the cold air. Winter was fast approaching and it was her intention to be gone before it struck. She handed him the letter she had been charged with delivering.

"What is this?" he asked her.

She smiled. "Your daughter said to tell you that she is ready to

meet you now.”

She could hear his breathing stop. “You met her?”

“Yes! And she is a sensational kind of woman, too.” He wrapped her in another hug and she left him to muse over the letter that brought such joy to his heart.

"Where is she?" She asked about Emily, who was usually awaiting her arrival in the foyer.

"She is a bit under the weather I am afraid," a deep voice responded to her left and she turned to see Martin exiting the kitchen with a tray of tea cups; the mint Emily loved and hot water, as he was catering to the woman he had fallen in love with. Theirs was an inspiring kind of love that made her ache even more for such a thing.

She kissed him on the cheek and plucked the tray from his hand. "I will see to her now. Go have a drink with Forrest and talk about whatever you men speak of."

He smiled down at her knowing better than to object and allowed her to take the tray from his hand. Sara was genuinely happy when she was in the house, and had she had the countenance to serve others for a lifetime the way Forrest had, she might have considered staying. But alas, she did not.

"Where is my cup of sunshine?" She asked gently, as she stepped into Emily's room staring at the woman who lay on her side.

"She has become a cup of rainfall today," Emily replied and she sounded weak. The big bump that was once her very flat stomach

might have had a little to do with it, for before her was a woman ripe in pregnancy and paying the price of the final stages.

"This child needs to get out of me this minute," Emily moaned.

Laughing at her, her joy soon turned to discomfort as Sara poured her a cup of her favourite tea and then helped her sit up to enjoy it.

"He will be out of you in two months and then you can give him a telling for all the nine months he made you feel pain."

Even saying it she knew that there was no way Emily would do that. She already loved her child more than words could explain. While the pregnant woman sipped her tea, her cheeks gaining color as she did, Sara stared at the trees dancing in the dark, and wondered if this man she was to meet had such an estate of his own. She would not mind if he didn't. Wealth had done her ill before and she had no doubt it could do it again.

"What is on your mind Sara?" Emily asked staring at her in a pensive mood.

"I tried your mail order bride suggestion, and I think I might have found a suitor."

Emily smiled with unbridled happiness at her. He is a traveller and about to make a stop in town in a couple days so I will meet him here first."

"That is lovely!" Emily proclaimed. "At least you get to meet him here minus all the travelling. This will be fun."

"You think so?" She asked her best friend, worriedly. "What if he

doesn't like me?"

"His loss," Emily responded without missing a beat.

Sara smiled at her and for the next couple hours they spoke of this man she was to meet and all the possibilities. She was excited beyond words. Sara purposely left out the story of the mysterious Adele, because as much as she might have helped, she knew Emily well enough to know that she would not approve of a woman who seemed to have sinister intentions. They spoke about life and what it would be like after her son was born, and when Emily drifted off to a peaceful sleep hours later, Sara covered her up and left the room.

"You are her soothsayer," Martin said outside the door as she exited.

She laughed. "No I am just a distraction she needs sometimes." She hugged him goodnight and made her way to her lush room. This mansion was fast becoming her home and she would have stayed had she not known that trouble always seemed to be waiting to kick down the door in pursuit of her. That was a situation she would not dare have her dear friends drawn into.

* * *

Zeb's horse took his own sweet time in climbing the Minnesota hill as if he sensed his master was no longer in a great hurry to meet the woman he hoped to marry. It was as if he was giving him time to reconsider his decision, though Zeb allowed the slow pace because their journey had been a long one and not because he needed a moment to think twice. Sara from Alabama had caught his attention and he was not letting go of it.

A couple hours later when they stopped for a break, stepping out of the midday shade of the forest, his breath left his chest in a strong whoosh. The view of the town nestled within rolling slopes and covered in the colors of autumn, was spectacular. He could see how one could move from the heat of the blazing south to call this place home.

“Well you know what they say about women from Minnesota...” Jerry said by his side.

Zeb had no clue about what they said of women from Minnesota. “No, tell me,” he replied.

“I haven’t got the faintest idea,” Jerry laughed and took a swig from his flask.

His spirit was contagious and Zeb couldn’t help but laugh along with him as they slowly made their way down the hill and into the little town. His first stop was to find decent lodging, ignoring the heads that turned this way and that as the unlikely duo rolled through the town on their horses. He booked himself into the inn that was reputed to be the most upstanding this side of the state. As per usual a hot meal and a long hot soak was in order, and when he was fed and all put together, shaving his two week old beard, he made his way to the store where Sara had made mention in her letter that he could find her in.

“Good evening,” he boomed with a smile fidgeting with the pocket watch in his waistcoat as he entered the small medicinal shop. Incense burned his nostrils and he looked at the plump older woman who squinted at him around a corner.

“Ain't one thing good about this evening sir,” the woman responded and he was taken aback. “My help has run off to marry some fine upstanding gentleman and winter is coming, and I am left all alone here on my own two feet that can barely even carry me around.”

“I have seen many abled bodies around town who look like they could use another job or two, how about you hire one?” he pointed out to the woman whose beady eyes narrowed at his suggestion.

“No sir,” you can't just go about hiring just anyone to tend to your shop. Who knows what they will run off with?” she exclaimed and began muttering to herself. He had a feeling that if anybody did indeed run off, it was more a case that they were running from her.

“A distrustful soul aren't you?” he said leaning against the counter taking in the woman as she turned this way and that.

“Distrustful no, but cautious, yes.”

Zeb chuckled. “There is such a thing as being too cautious. Soon you will be blinded to the good in others.”

“Aye, did you come in here to preach to me or are you going to buy something?”

He smiled. There was something about this woman that he liked. “I am Zebron McAlister,” he extended his hand as he spoke.

“I am Josy. Most people your age call me Aunt Josy out of respect,” she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Well Aunt Josy, I am her to call on Sara Jones. She said I could

find her here.”

“Oh she did, did she?” the woman asked, turning her attention back to whatever she had been doing. “She works in the diner across town, but helps out here when she is able to. On the weekends though she visits my niece at the Longmore mansion across town. If you are looking for her that is likely where she will be.”

For a woman as distrustful as she was, she sure did give him a lot of information. He wasn't about to point it out though and find himself on her wrong side. He could tell that was not a side he wanted to be on.

“I am not sure how much longer I will be in town,” he said to her, “but if you do need help here I am willing to volunteer some of my free time while I am here, and hopefully you will find a more permanent hand to help by the time I leave.”

His words stopped her in her tracks and he looked at the shocked look that crossed her face. It was slowly followed by a smile and she nodded in appreciation. “Your wife to be is a lucky woman,” Aunt Josy said.

“I hope she will think so too,” he chuckled and left.

He knew the Longmore mansion well. He had done business there several times for a man named Forrest over the years. He told Jerry where he was going and again told the matron of the hotel as his friend seemed half way down a bottle of scotch. Just in case the alcohol wiped his memory he wanted him to be able to find him. Dashing across town he spurred his well-rested horse on and made the four mile trip in a little under a half hour. With any luck he would be

able to spend the night and his well deserving horse could sleep in the warmth of a stable.

The cast iron doors of the mansion swung open before he could dismount his trusty steed.

“Zeb? Zeb! Is that you?” came the unsure, but happy question.

“Yes sir, Forrest. It is I, the one and only, in the flesh.”

The older man and a good friend hopped down the stairs to meet him. “I thought the wolves might have stripped the skin from your bones and returned you to the furnaces of hell from where you came.”

“They would have to be some seriously ambitious wolves for I am not to be out done so easily, old friend.”

Their embrace was one of old friends who had gone too long without seeing one another and as his horse was led to the stable by a stable hand, he was led into the warmth of the mansion, and he knew pretty quickly that he would not be leaving that night.

“What brings you to Minnesota?” Forrest asked him.

“You would not believe me if I told you,” Zeb said.

“I have come to find that many things are believable these days. If our very own Martin can find himself a fine woman and get himself married, just about anything is possible.”

They both laughed out loud, and when the moment of merriment had passed, Zeb cleared his throat. “I am actually here pursuing the same ends. I am told Sara Jones is here. She responded to my ad for a

wife and mother for my son, I was on my way home after my job and decided to make the detour to see her.”

Forrest’s cup stopped halfway to his lips. “You are the man she has been not stop talking about and happily telling our Emily about?”

“She has spoken of me?” he asked nervously, wiping the non-existent sweat from his brows. “Were they pleasant words?”

Forrest laughed and slapped him on the back. “My friend I think she might be smitten by you. Quite a turn of events here, and since you are just in time for diner I will introduce you to her at the dinner table.”

Zeb downed his alcohol in one go, nervous at the prospect of finally getting what he had travelled so far for. They chatted for a few more minutes before the diner bell was rung and he prepared himself for the moment of truth. When it did come, it did not quite come the way he expected.

“You!” he heard the shout before he saw the pregnant woman wobbling into the room. Her face looked familiar but he couldn’t quite place it. “You!” she shouted again and the feral look that overtook her face was enough to make him doubt his own existence.

“Yes?” Me,” he said hesitantly, backing away from her as she took an umbrella from the door she passed and stalked towards him.

“Get out of my house!” she shouted at him, poking him roughly in the gut with the pointed end of the weapon she carried. “Out!”

“Emily!” Forrest said stepping between them. “What has gotten

into you?”

“What is all the raucous about?” another woman said rushing into the parlor. Zeb’s breath left his chest as he looked at the woman who had emerald eyes so soothing that he could barely feel himself standing there. The green dress she wore matched her eyes and he couldn’t help but notice the way her fingers curled elegantly around that of the woman who was still trying to clobber him with her umbrella.

“This brute and ruffian is what the raucous is all about!” Emily continued. “Sara, I want him out of my house this instant.”

“Okay,” the woman said turning to him and he could not help but smile.

“Hi I am Zebron McAllister,” he said to Sara. Enthralled by her presence the immediate danger of being clobbered was nothing to him.

Emily stopped jabbing at him and turned to Sara. “This is the man from your letters?”

“Apparently so,” Sara responded, smiling at him. “He is quite dashing.”

He blushed at the blatant compliment to her friend who still glared at him.

“No!” Emily said pacing in small circles.

“No what?” they all asked in unison, causing her to stop pacing and glare back at each of them in turn.

“No, you will not marry him. I will not allow it!” Emily was clearly convinced he was no good, but he was too caught up with Sara’s entrancing and easy presence to be concerned by what her friend was saying.

“Emily dear,” Sara began, taking her friend gently by the hand and leading her to the side. “I don’t think that is your call, but if you have reason to believe this then please, explain it to me.”

“What is all the fuss about?” Martin rushed through the back door of the parlor, the frosty mountain wind sweeping in behind him.

“Your wife is about to clobber the man I am to meet for reasons she cannot explain.”

The room all of a sudden went silent, and Zeb smiled. “Martin?”

Martin turned to look at him and the smile that broke out on his face was enough to say Emily would get no support from her husband either.

“Zeb! Zebron, you ole tinker!” Martin pulled the man into a hug so fierce Zeb felt all his misplaced pieces fall back together. “What have you done to my wife to make her want to wipe you from this earth?”

They laughed. “I am waiting for her to say.”

All eyes turned to Emily who was looking at them all as if she was mad, and when she recounted the tale of Mississippi where her then mistress Jenny, was smacked across the face and nearly taken hostage by Zeb in order to collect at debt, they all turned and frowned at him.

“I have a feeling I should let her clobber you for that,” Martin said with a frown. Zeb hung his head in shame for a moment.

“I have no excuse as that was just a lapse in judgement.”

Emily stood. “Then you must understand that is why I cannot be okay with you marrying my best friend here. What if you were to have another lapse in judgement and she was to pay the price?”

Zeb’s heart shattered into a million pieces as he could see a bit of the radiance leave Sara’s face. Here he was after wanting her for so long, and finally meeting her, to only have what looked like his hopes shattered right there before his eyes.

“I can tell you I am no abusive man. This incident was three years ago and it is things like that, that have me giving up the trade to seek out a more amiable means. I have officially retired and have begun my search for a wife and a mother to my son.”

Emily still looked unconvinced. “I don’t want her in harm’s way.”

“She won’t be,” Zeb said with a smile Sara returned. “And you have no idea the guilt and shame I carry around for that one lapse in judgement.”

Sara was the one to step in to ease his struggle. “Here, here. Let’s leave the dark discussions for another time. For now, let us just eat and be thankful for old friends and new ones,” she added the last bit turning to look at him.

“Don’t make any sudden movements,” Sara said to him as they moved towards the dining room. “The carrier of the tiny human will

chomp your head off without hesitation.”

Zeb stifled a laugh and made a decision then and there that there was no way he was going to be leaving without Sara on his arm. His spirit was set ablaze by her presence and that was a sign of the possibility of so many things.

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CHAPTER 5

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Dinner was a mixture of laughter with angry glances as Emily forever stared at the man she was still distrustful of. Zeb however, made sure not to return the stares and avoided them as best he could. Soon, the loving person she was would tire and she would concede to giving him a second chance.

"How is the young one?" Forrest asked and Sara turned her attention away from admiring his strong features and golden eyes to listen to what he said of the son he had written about.

"He writes me weekly, knowing my schedule and sending letters to the places he knows I will be. I can see his grammar has improved significantly, but of his health and strength I have not much knowledge."

She could hear the sadness in his voice as he spoke of the son he longed to be with, and her soul ached with his.

"It must be hard," Emily said, her voice softening. "I don't think I could ever be away from this one who hasn't even been born yet for so long."

"It is," she heard Zeb's voice break and knew that he masked his pain well but he felt it nonetheless. "I look forward to going home to him in a couple weeks, and should you decide to come Sara, you will find him a very polite and likeable child."

"Nothing of the ruffian his father is known to be then?"

Zeb laughed knowing she meant no ill. "No," the man responded and she fell in love with the twinkle in his eyes.

Dinner continued along those lines with stories of the war coming up and Zeb telling a bit from his adventures. She sat in silence and soaked up all of the happiness floating around the table, then decided that she would see what life had to offer her there, but first thing tomorrow evening she would go meet the men whose debt she must pay, and be done with it once and for all. When everyone else had gone to bed, she sat in the foyer in the glow of a dim lantern and turned to Zeb.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Zebron," she said, slowly rolling his strange name off her tongue. She loved the way it felt and sounded.

He stepped up to her, tucking a stray hair behind her ears. "And it is more than a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sara."

They smiled at each other for what seemed like an eternity and the echoes of their hearts introduced themselves. Before her stood a man so masculine she felt guarded in his presence, but yet so soft a soul she could feel herself melting there. This was a connection she had never before felt and she knew that she wouldn't be able to resist him, no matter how hard she tried.

"Will you travel with me?" He asked her, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

She looked at him trying to get the last pieces of information she needed to make a good decision. He simply smiled a smile that oozed nothing but understanding.

"I will travel with you," she said softly and he smiled at her with joy.

"I will make sure you are never disappointed."

She laughed at his childish glee and knew that somehow he would keep his word. "When do we leave?" She asked him.

"By week's end. I promised your Aunt Josy I would give her a hand in her store and I must keep my word."

Sara looked at him in pleased shock and decided that no matter what he had to do for a living, he most certainly was a man of honor. She agreed with his timing and decided that come morning, she would make the necessary preparations. At daybreak she made her way to town square and spoke to the one other friend she had made in town. The old blacksmith who was her messenger.

"Tell the men I am ready to pay my debts in full and they can meet me at the diner at evening time tomorrow."

He looked at her suspiciously. "Have you done something illegal to get that much money?"

"Nothing more than sell the moonshine you have left for me. Now I have enough and that concludes our arrangement. If you would like someone to continue then there is a young man who is more than willing to take my place."

The strong southern alcohol that was illegal in most states had quite the market in the north and she had been able to capitalize on it. She was happy she could now pay off her ex-fiancé's gambling debts

in full. A staggering six thousand dollars; a small fortune she had struggled to make but would not be able to keep for herself. She was looking towards the future, so she was glad to leave the debt and the debt collectors in the past. She stopped by the market to get a few fresh fruits before riding back to the mansion to find that everyone was up.

"Zeb here thought you might have ran off leaving him to his wounded heart," Forrest poked fun at his old friend. Zeb glared at him but did not speak.

"I merely went to get the fresh picks from the market. I haven't run off anywhere."

Zeb smiled and she could almost see the relief flash across his face as they settled into breakfast and then spent the rest of the morning lounging. Later that evening they said their goodbyes and promised to visit when they passed back that way on their way to Washington. Emily cried as expected and Sara held her, knowing there was little else she could ever do.

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CHAPTER 6

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Zeb stayed true to his promise to Aunt Josy and as soon as they got to the other side of town he left Sara to work out the week at the diner and made his way to the medicine shop to keep the old woman's company.

"You are back!" she exclaimed gleefully. She immediately set him to work and he was happy he had volunteered because the heavy lifting and climbing the woman would have had to do on her own, and for her it was near impossible. When lunch time rolled around, she provided him with food she cooked on the small wooded area in the back of the shop and they sat and spoke about life. The conversation soon took an expected turn.

"So you are to marry our Sara, then?" she asked.

He was never one to jump the gun and so he spoke the truth... "I have no idea if she will want to marry me, but she has agreed to the trip and so we will be heading off by week's end. I only hope she will find me suitable."

"I think you both will serve each other perfectly," Aunt Josy said and there was a certain hint to her words that told him she knew more than she was letting on.

"Why do you say that?"

Aunt Josy looked at him shocked as if unable to believe she had actually said those words. "Well, let us just say that Sara was made for

a man who will understand that we all carry the stories we were born into wherever we go, and I believe you are the man best equipped for that.”

Zeb knew what those words meant. It meant that his wife to be had secrets but that was okay, he would give her time and room enough to come to him with them. For now, he intended to be her safe haven, and God bless the man or woman who would dare do her harm. He worked the rest of the day in silence and the following day as well, after a night on the town with Jerry. He woke up the day after that and showed up at Aunt Josy's before she did. When work was finished that day, he made his way to the diner Sara worked in and took a seat in the section away from hers. He wanted to watch her at work while he ate.

Zeb sat in his seat waiting on his plate of ribs to be served. Instantly, his eyes was drawn to a man who looked like he had nothing but war on his mind and he watched the man, whose face was very familiar, watching Sara and a young man who sat in her section with the with ire of the hunter in him. Instantly, he knew who it was. His name was Joshua, a bounty hunter turned illegal peddler in the north. His business was his life and credibility and honesty had no place in his work. Anyone who could not comply with his terms could not do business with him. Even worse was the fact that if they thought to outsmart him with silly tricks, then came to him unremorseful, he would deal with them accordingly. Joshua had no patience for folly and people's emotions had no place in his bank account. This was something the young man he watched with an intense gaze would learn the hard way today. Zeb had a feeling that whatever the crime was that he was currently, he would act as though he hadn't committed it. That was the common position most criminals always

took.

For that he would pay.

Zeb looked around the place to find Joshua's men stationed at the door and he began to wonder if this is the past Aunt Josy hinted at when they spoke of Sara's secrets. How could a woman such as herself have gotten involved with the likes of Joshua who even he avoided at all costs? The illegal moonshine business he ran across the country was enough to have the man on wanted posters across the states, but he was untouchable because even the people who were supposed to keep him in check benefitted from his illegal exploits. Zeb watched his men stationed at the door, milling around the evening stragglers now crowding the bar and knew they would make sure that the source of Joshua's ire did not leave without him knowing. In the meantime, the plate of ribs Zeb was now being served deserved his undivided attention. He would enjoy his meal while he kept an eye on Sara and the threat she seemed to be ignoring, or was completely oblivious to.

The jingle on the door chimes sounded over the chatter that had increased and he lifted his head with a single rib sticking out of his mouth to look at the two beauties who playfully nudged each other as they giggled through the door. He had seen them here before, and in the medicine store the day before. He watched them take their seats, admiring the smiles that never left their faces and when Joshua saw them he walked over and was given a huge hug from both. Then to his utter surprise the beauties invited him to join them.

Enjoy your last meal, Zeb thought as he watched the back of the man's curly head. He was envisioning the horrible things Joshua did to people.

Zeb knew he himself was no model citizen, but the one thing he hated more than other crooks, were people who preyed on the weak and that was how Joshua had built his empire. Poetic justice is what most people would call it, but he had a code. It made him predictable, and without morals and codes, you were nothing more than a savage.

He finished up his ribs and ordered seconds, not sure where he was going to put it, and as he was finishing up with his second plateful, the young man got up and bid the beauties good bye. Had he known he had a bull's eye on his back, Zeb was sure he would never have opted to use the back exit. Joshua's men looked at him and he gave the nod. Two of his men who had a penchant for pain without murder followed the man out, and as Joshua left money on the table for his bill and followed them, Zeb did the same and followed, closely on their heels.

"The boss would like to have a word with you," one of the men he knew to be Jake said as they slammed the skinny young man into the wall.

"Enough!" Zeb ordered as he walked down the back alley as Jake landed a solid punch in the man's stomach.

"Hello Zebron," Jake said as the man groaned in pain trying hard to keep his balance. "This does not include you so I suggest you take a few steps back."

"Josh, I am going to pay you back," the young man croaked around the pain in his stomach, looking past Zeb to the man who stood beside him.

Joshua chuckled and lit a cigarette. "This is not about the money

son; this is about trying to get one up on me."

The young man again began to say something in his defense, but Joshua held up a hand to stop him. Whatever he had to say was of no use. Zeb knew he would be used as an example, but he would intervene as best as he could. Joshua took a draw from his cigarette and closed his eye allowing the silence to make his prey anxious. Zeb remembered a conversation he had had with Joshua some time ago and the man had expressed that in his past life he could have been a lion or a tiger, he enjoyed the chase. Most people thought of him as a psycho, but even psychosis had its place in society and he held his with pride. It was a pride that could be understood but one that always led to bloodshed, and that was what Zeb would not allow.

"You will pay be back Michael, and if you ever steal from me again," Josh let his words trail off as he handed his cigarette to Jake and fired punch after punch at the young man. Zeb stepped in and two of the men tried to stop him, but he was bigger than them and pretty soon, they were lying on the ground nursing their own wounds. He was too late, as by the time he was done with the two, the young man was unconscious on the ground, and possibly had a broken jaw.

"Get away from him!" A scream came from the door, and their heads turned to see one of the beauties running towards them. She bent over Michael and threw a hateful glance up at the men around him.

"What did you do?!" Her rage was more of a cry for them to help but Joshua was in no mood. He walked off ignoring her.

"Call your friend some medical help or something, he's going to need it," Joshua threw him over his shoulder. But he didn't get much

further before a bottle landed in the back of his head. He felt the blood coming, and as drops of blood soiled his white shirt collar he stalked back to the defiant woman who had dared assault him.

Grabbing her by the neck Josh slammed her into the wall, his anger at being assaulted replacing all common sense and Zeb sent a punch to his face as causing his grip to loosen.

“What is going on out here?” Sara came rushing out and was surprised to see Zeb in the midst of all the raucous. “Zebron what are you doing?”

Before he could answer the disappointment that flashed in her eyes was too much for him and he lost his words.

Joshua took the opportunity his momentary distraction allowed and sent a solid punch into his face. "Do not test my faith, unless you want to take his place. Make sure he pays me what he owes and I will forget this."

Joshua stepped away from them and the young woman coughed trying to catch her breath.

"Whatever he owes you will have to go to his medical bills," she said to him through clenched teeth. He couldn't figure out whether she simply had a death wish or if she was just brave. Though bravery and stupidity very often went hand in hand, case in point-the fiery dark eyes that glared at him in defiance. He stared down at her heart shaped face and slender form and knew Joshua could break her in one go. Yet as she stood he saw a kind of strength to her that intrigued him. He decided to walk away from her.

"The name is Cara," she spat at him as he walked off. "Remember it, because if you ever touch him again I'm going to break your face."

Joshua turned to her and smiled. "Ask this one here what I do to pretty women who cross me," Joshua said and pointed at Sara. Now Zeb knew for sure that his assumptions were not unfounded.

"What is he talking about Sara?" he asked her but she just stared back at him in embarrassed shock.

"Let's just say I have not always made the best decisions in my life," she said and turned, heading back into the diner. He stood there for a moment as he tried to process what she had just said.

"Sara!" he called after her managing to catch her before she went back out onto the floor to carry out her duties. "Stop!"

"Why?" she turned to him in anger. "So you can apologize for beating men in alleys or so you can tell me you no longer want a wife who comes with associates such as the upstanding Mr. Joshua Debeau?"

He smiled down at her. "I won't apologize for punching him in the face or his men, because they were beating up the young man who stood no chance against them. And yes, you having been affiliated with him is a matter of concern, but I am sure you have your reasons and when you are ready to tell me I hope you will."

His response stopped her in her tracks, and she turned to look at him thinking that what he had just said was in no way believable. He rested a palm, cold from the evening air against her cheek and she winced as she lifted hers to cover his. He had seen her wince from that

movement before and wanted to know what was causing her pain.

“I had a run in with Joshua a couple weeks before you came by, my bones are slowly healing,” she said softly.

Zeb’s anger rose to indescribable proportions. “I am going to kill him!”

“You will do no such thing, men like them are not worth the trouble,” she said but he couldn’t promise that if he saw him in the streets when he left that he wouldn’t give him a proper beating.

“And this business you have with him, is it done?” he asked more out of concern for her than out of curiosity.

“I had a gambling debt my ex-fiancé left me with when he ran off with some other woman. Joshua couldn’t find him so I became the debtor and he followed me from state to state as I ran from him. I finally cleared that debt up a couple days ago.”

Zeb was seething but he knew better than to go picking a fight, so he left it up to the heavens to put Joshua back in his way so he could pummel him into oblivion. “Okay,” he said to her.

They looked at each other for a brief moment before he let her go back to her work and he took up residence at the bar waiting on her to finish. When she was finally done, he would not take no for an answer and insisted she stay in the motel he was staying in. He worried Joshua’s men might pay her a visit. He saw to it that she was settled into her own room and then went back to his for the night. He checked in on Jerry on the way, and found him in alms with a gorgeous red head he had found some place. He was a happy man.

Turning in early for the night Zeb's thoughts remained on what life would become when he took Sara home. He had been right about her, she had a touch of destiny and a pinch of danger about her and she complemented him well. If only he could delve into that mind to see what else lay there, but he was sure there would be time enough for that. He intended to make her see that he would be the last to judge her and the first to support her always. Their plan was to leave in two days, but he had a feeling they should be on their way come morning.

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CHAPTER 7

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The entire three weeks it took them to get from Minnesota to Washington, all Zeb could think about was how happy he was to have her going home with him and he prayed his son would like her. It was a prayer he prayed with a nervous heart, for his son was young but strongly convicted towards any cause he set himself to and he knew that there was very little he could do if the boy somehow decided that she was not going to be his new mother.

As he drew closer to home the nostalgia hit harder, sensing that it would soon no longer have a place to reside. She longed to drink from the rivers flowing from the mountains in the east, and enjoy enchanted conversations with the men who worked for him and the Indians, who still lived in the hills around his ranch and gazed into the setting sun that brought with it the magical creatures of the night.

As he looked up at the clouds, heavy with the autumn rain that would fall that night, his town majestically came into view as they came through the forest pass. He looked back at Sara who stared in wonder at the white capped mountains touched with snow in the distance. Her blonde hair and green eyes catching the sunlight and her skin glittered like diamonds as the rays of the sun warmly welcomed her home. This would indeed be her home as long as she chose it the way it was choosing her.

“My ranch is about an hour in that direction,” he pointed up to the mountain to the east. “We should be there by sun down.”

She smiled at him excitedly and he resisted the urge to kiss her.

That was something he would not do unless she had given him permission to do so. There would be time enough for that later. He had sent word ahead to Margaret, the woman who looked after his home when he was away, and the one responsible for his son's care. She would no doubt be cooking them out of their winter stock in preparation for the arrival of the one he had told her would hopefully be his wife. She would want to make a lasting impression, and she no doubt would do just that.

An hour later as they neared the outpost of his ranch, he could see the smoke curling towards the heavens from the chimney and a few men chopping wood outside. But the sight that warmed his heart as he looked ahead was the tiny legs of a bouncing ginger haired boy making his way to him. He hopped from his horse and jogged to meet him.

"Father!" the young pint sized human screamed as he lifted him with joyous laughter and spun him in the air. "You are home and I am never allowing you to leave again. I have missed you."

The boy's proclamation warmed his heart as he curled his tiny legs around him. "I won't be leaving again anytime soon my boy," he whispered into his son's ear. Their embrace was a lasting one, hearing tell of the stories he had missed out on while he had been away from home for almost an entire year. "I have missed you too," he whispered to the boy who nestled his face into his neck and held on to him as if he had no plans of ever letting go.

"Who is that father?" the boy asked. "Is that her?"

He wiggled out of Zeb's hand and he let him go. "Hi, I am Peter. I'm the man of the ranch when my father isn't around," he introduced

himself to Sara as she dismounted her horse.

“Pleased to meet you Peter,” she said with a curtsy. “My name is Sara, and I am honored to be welcomed into your humble abode.”

Peter looked back at him and giggled. “You are right father, I like her.”

They all laughed as he watched Peter take her hand and directed her towards the house, telling her of all the goodies Margaret had prepared for their arrival. Zeb watched them as they walked ahead of him, and his heart warmed. He really hoped she would say yes when he asked her to marry him later that day. For now, he simply enjoyed the sight of them getting along. He turned his nose skyward and inhaled the clean fresh mountain air, then looked back at his home. It was a sprawling ranch home that would soon be filled with love and family.

He had left instructions of what was to be built and they had outdone his orders. When he entered the parlor, he found bear skin rugs and a warm fire. Margaret, who was teary eyed at his return had easily stolen his attention as soon as he entered. The woman was like a mother to him and he could never repay her for raising his child the way she had.

“I like this one,” she whispered as she wrapped him a warm hug and their eyes followed Sara who was busy helping to set the table for dinner. “And so does the little one.”

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Sara sat at the dinner table listening to the Peter tell them all they

had missed while they had been busy out east. It was quite heart-warming to listen to his tales as he spun them for their merriment. When dinner was finished the young man took her on a tour of his grand home and then introduced her to the room Margaret had prepared for her.

"I like the view of the valley from here so I thought you would too," he said, explaining why he had selected that room for her.

"Thank you Peter, I love it."

The boy beamed up at her and she sensed there was something he wanted to say, though he appeared a little too shy to speak, and so she bent before him to let him know he could.

"What is it?" She urged gently. "You can talk to me."

He sighed. "Are you going to be my new mother?"

She didn't know what to say, so she asked, "Would you mind if I were?"

"No, I wouldn't. I like you, but then I don't know if you are staying."

"Well that is something I have to speak about with your father and then we will both know by morning."

He nodded his head before walking out the door. "I hope you decide to stay. You will like it here."

She was warmed by his suggestion, but sadly, that was not always how things worked. She took a long soak in the warm bath one of the

maids prepared for her and then she made her way to the parlor where a log fire burned to keep them warm.

"How do you like it here on your first day?" Zeb asked her as she walked in. He handed her a glass of wine as she sat on the soft sofa beside him.

"I love it here and Peter is quite the gem."

Zeb smiled at her. "He can be a bit of a mink every now and then but he is a good boy."

"He takes after his father then," she said and she could see him blush with his smile.

"Will you stay with me as my wife then Sara?" She was surprised that the question had come so soon. She had been expecting it, but only when he might have buttered her up some more. She smiled appreciative of the fact that he saw no need to beat around the bush.

"Yes," she whispered and watched the smile spread across his face. "But before we agree on it there is one more thing you need to know."

He turned to her with patience. "I left Alabama a long time ago because my uncle had murdered my parents and would have done the same thing to me if I had not left. I defied his orders to marry some old man when he took over my parent's estate and he was not pleased. Ever since, he has hired bounty hunters who have always somehow found me everywhere I went and I am afraid they might come here."

Zeb stepped up to her and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I hope they do, because that would be the last of them."

She smiled against his chest as he wrapped her in a hug. "I don't ever want to bring trouble to your doorsteps," she said.

"I am here Sara, so whatever comes we will face it together."

It was a firm proclamation that brought with it the security she had always wanted and a week later they had a small service with just five people present, where they exchanged short vows and signed their marriage license. Peter was ecstatic and immediately started to commandeer her time. She fell in love with the five year old who had a really old soul. But all of this happiness would soon take a more sinister turn just a week later when the bounty hunters she feared did make their appearance known.

"Oh how you have settled nicely," one said walking up to where she stood in the yard.

"Zeb!" She screamed and grabbed Peter who never left her side. Her husband came running out of the house with a gun in his hand and hearing her screams, a couple ranch hands came to flank him.

"Morgan," Zeb said walking up to the man. "Fancy finding you on my property. It has been a while."

Morgan held up his hand. "I want no trouble Zeb. I simply came for the woman."

"You mean my wife?" Zeb asked. "What on earth could you possibly want with her??"

Sara stood in the doorway watching the men. She would have willed Zeb to shoot the man in his leg, but that was a violent thought

she immediately begged forgiveness for.

"Your wife?" Morgan asked. "But she is betrothed to another."

"By whose order? And why does that warrant you hunting her like an animal?"

Morgan was silent. "She is a job I simply came to finish so that I can collect the rest of my money."

"Well, I suggest you tell her uncle that women have a right to choose, and whatever other plans he has for her are cancelled because we are now happily married."

Morgan hesitated but saw the danger in Zeb's eyes and Sara watched too men who were mere rivals come to a silent agreement. After a moment Morgan smiled.

"She looks happy here and I am happy for you old friend."

Sara was suspicious of the exchange. "Will he send other men?" She asked him.

"I wouldn't worry about that ma'am," Morgan said. "We all know not to mess with Zeb."

The conversation needed not go any further and Morgan was invited in for a hot meal before he was sent on his way. Zeb kept a wary eye on him the entire time and Peter kept his distance.

"Tell my uncle that I have no interest in reclaiming the estate he stole from me after he killed my parents and even less in ever seeing him again. Tell him he can let me go, because I will not come back to

stab him in the back as much as he might deserve it. Tell him to let me go and move on with his life, much like I have moved on with mine."

Zeb escorted the bounty hunter from his property about an hour later and though they seemed to have parted on good terms he instructed his men to see to it that Morgan did not tarry in the town, and if he did, he wanted a report as to his every move.

"Don't worry my love," he said to her that night. "There is absolutely nothing that will come after you that I won't protect you from... nothing!"

He kissed her softly as they headed to bed, forgetting the world around them. She slept peacefully that night, knowing that Zeb's word was his honor and his love for her shone true with each passing day. She had no intentions of worrying a strand of hair on her head over what was not to be an issue to begin with.

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CHAPTER 8

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Life on the ranch settled into a happy and easy routine, and by the time the first snowflakes hit the ground Sara was well cemented into her life as a new wife. She could feel herself falling in love with the man who had a hint of the devil about him. She watched him pull pranks on his son, and he was there at her every whim, catering to her without her need to demand it. She fell in love with him as the sun rose each day and with its setting.

When Margaret took sick and she had to go into the town with her, she hated leaving them behind but had no choice. She gave Peter strict instructions for his study and even stricter instructions about playing outside while it snowed. Zeb was not pleased she had to leave but they all could not go and so with an aching heart she left her two men at home and prayed they would not burn it to the ground with their usual mischief.

“You inherited a wonderful gift,” Margaret said to her one night in the medical house where she was on the mend.

“What is that?” Sara asked her, worriedly looking at the woman who had been mumbling feverishly for days now. The fever had broken the day before and so she should not be speaking in gibberish anymore.

“This family you have, treasure them as they treasure you and go back home to them.”

“I won’t leave you alone Margaret, we will both go back home

when you are well enough to do so.”

Margaret frowned at her. “You are a stubborn one. No wonder you and the mister get along just fine.”

She laughed at the old woman as she wiped the sweat from her brow. “I do value them beyond words you know. And my greatest fear is that someday I might lose them.”

Margaret’s sympathetic smile told her she understood. “Fear is good young lady. Fear means you have something to lose and it also means you have something to live for. If none of those variables were in play then we would all be soulless creatures walking about.”

Sara sighed in contentment. She had a lot to be thankful for and every day that she woke up she gave thanks to the Lord for what she had. Who knew that some strange woman named Adele would have had this much clairvoyance to show her the way she should go. She was happy she had taken heed because now she could not envision her life without the two men she called her own.

“Life is short Sara. Make sure you spend every day in gratitude and nothing else. Let go of the past and build a solid and happy future for yourself, and make sure Peter grows into the kind of young man he should be.”

There was an ominous tone to Margaret’s words that she did not like but she spoke to her into the wee hours of the morning anyway. When she awakened shortly before eight the following day, the stillness in the room she shared with her was deafening.

“Margaret?” she called to the old woman sleepily. No response

came. "Margaret!" she called again. She bolted out of bed and to the woman's beside, and after just a moment she knew that she had passed.

The cold pasty look on the woman's face and the coldness of her skin said all that needed said. She rested her head on her chest and wept. She wept for the years she had not known her and wept for the years to come that she would not be around. Her death would be felt on the ranch as she was the oil that kept all the hinges moving and she left a big shoe for Sara to fill. She knew Peter would be heartbroken and so would Zeb, but like Margaret had said... life is way too short.

The doctor confirmed that the woman had indeed passed and she made preparations to have the body brought to the hill the following day for burial. Then in sombre silence she made her way back to her family on the cool mountainside. Coming to the house she was looking for she smiled at the well kept lawn that was littered with fresh snow hanging from the trees out front. Oh the joys of winter had arrived. The front door flew open as she was about to knock and she looked down at the bright eyed and ginger haired tiny human that stared back at her.

"I missed you Sara," Peter said hopping into her arms. "And you missed all our evening rituals!" She rolled her eyes playfully at the one other person in the world she would give her life for. His tiny frame clad in his pajamas stalking down the hallway of the perfectly decorated house told her he was upset with her and her heart broke just a bit more at knowing she would soon tell him the disappointing news.

"I know Peter," she said to the little boy who had stolen her heart

the day she met him. "But I did tell you I wouldn't be around, I had something really important to do."

"More important than me?" he asked, stopping abruptly she nearly tripped over him as he turned his pouting face to glare at her. They had kept Margaret's illness away from him and she would not break this news to him like that.

"Never!" she said quickly. "But important enough that I had to give up a few evening rituals." He started walking again as a loud bang sounded in the kitchen close by.

"Father's trying to cook again," he said rolling his eyes and she knew that she would have to make the rounds to the kitchen if they were to have an edible meal that night.

"I give up on learning how to cook Peter!" Zeb yelled to his son wherever he was in the house. "I think we will go find your mother tonight before we starve." She laughed at his frustration that echoed in the house as she rounded the corner and stared at him abusing the inanimate cooking equipment.

"I could have brought food had I known you were this hopeless," she laughed at him, earning a glare from the man she loved. He rushed to her with happiness nonetheless and lifted her from her feet.

"We have been saved, my son" he cried out twirling her. "We shan't starve this day after all!"

"Glory be!" Peter chimed in and they both did some dance that was to show their happiness but only made them look as if they had lost their sanity. She laughed. Happy to be home to the two people she

would love forever no matter how crazy they were. She momentarily forgot that soon she would be breaking their hearts with the news of Margaret's passing.

"Want some of my candy?" Peter asked looking at her with pride brimming in his eyes. No doubt he had fun while she was away, and the stable hand had ignored her orders to keep the sweets away from him. She nodded anyway and headed off with him before Zeb's questioning eyes could bring her to tears then and there. They headed to his room as he filled her with stories of all the things he had been up to while she was away, making her laugh so hard she forgot all the pain that had been building up inside her. She was even sadder listening to him that Margaret would not be around to see him grow into the fine young man she knew he was going to become. Once again she was reminded of two things: how short life was and how unfair it could be.

"I need you to do me a favor." His face lit up at her words. At her words. There was nothing he loved more than feeling he was doing a great thing for a grown up.

"Is it another one of those favors?" he asked, referring to a favor he could never mention to anyone. "Or just a regular favor?" she could hear the anticipated disappointment in his last question. She would disappoint him by not disappointing him.

"I need you to stay here for a bit and eat as much candy as you like. I need a few minutes to speak to your father alone."

"Am I in trouble?" his eyes flashed with worry.

"Never! Well, as long as you don't tell him I told you to eat all the

candy you want.”

“Okay,” he smiled at her and she left him to his childish musings and the joy of candy for a while. Walking down the stairs her heart was heavy with sadness, but it could be avoided no longer.

“He missed you,” Zeb said smiling at her as he waited with a glass of wine. “We both did.” She reached up on her tip toes to give him a kiss.

“Margaret died in her sleep last night,” she said flatly and watched his glass as it slowed in its ascent to his lips. He looked at her in shock and she stepped away from him, giving him room to digest the information. “I don’t think she was in pain, because she was up all night talking to me, but when I woke this morning...” her words trailed off and the tears she had thought she had no more of came flooding down her face.

Zeb ran a hand across his face and then through his hair. “She was the only mother I ever knew,” he said sadly and as if his feet could not hold him up anymore he sat at the foot of the stairs and wept. Sara did the only thing she could do and held him. She held him as his body quaked with sadness and he let the tears flow, and when he finished crying and gathered himself a little, he looked at her.

“We have to tell Peter,” he said sadly. She agreed.

Later that evening as they sat at the table for dinner, the silence was deafening. They had told all the workers of her passing and they felt the same sadness in her sudden absence as she was like a mother to them as well.

“Where is Margaret?” Peter asked looking around for her. “I thought she was coming home with you.”

“Do you remember that conversation we had some time ago about what can happen when someone gets ill?” Zeb asked him.

“They die and that means they go to heaven and I don’t get to see them anymore,” Peter said plopping a broccoli in his mouth.

“Yes,” Zeb said. “Well, that is what happened to Margaret.”

Peter’s chewing slowed as he looked at them both. “Why did you let it?” he asked angrily.

“We had no choice. She was very ill,” Sara tried to explain to him. “Sickness is not something we do or do not allow and we have no control over death. When it comes it comes.”

“I don’t want her to be dead,” he said as tears slipped down his face. Sara’s heart broke and she scooped him up from his chair as he wrapped himself around her.

“Neither do I my love. Neither do I.”

“Will you die, Sara?” he asked her.

She was shocked at the question but she would not lie to him. “Yes, someday, but not right now.”

“How do you know that if you say when death comes we get no say?”

She smiled at how smart he was. Well I have every intention of

putting up a good fight.”

That seemed to satiate him, but he had no interest in food for the rest of the day. That night he crawled into bed with his parents and they allowed him. His tiny hands were kissed a multitude of times and he fell asleep with the warmth of them surrounding him.

“I will miss her,” she said to Zeb.

“I know, me too.”

They buried her the following day and sat drinking to stories of her well into the night. By dawn’s light they had accepted the reality and she finally told him what she had been holding in for some time now.

“I think I am with child,” she said to him.

“You mean I get a sister?!” Peter piped up from his play.

They laughed and Zeb kissed her. “Margaret would have loved that.”

“I think she knew,” Sara told him and he wrapped her up tightly.

“I think she knew.”

* * *

EPILOGUE

* * *

The following summer

The winter had passed by in a flash and then spring had made itself known. With late summer came the birth of their beautiful bouncing baby girl, just as Peter had predicted and the little boy stood guard over her twenty-four seven. Not so much as an ant was allowed to march too closely to her cradle. A month later when she was well enough to travel they set out on a long trip to Texas where the Collards welcomed them with open arms.

“Sara!” Emily who was pregnant with her second child and carrying a beautiful baby boy was the first to greet her. She hugged her friend as if their lives depended on it and looked forward to the coming months they would all be spending together.

“I was beginning to think you folks would never get here,” Jenny said, heading outside to greet her. Sara found she had as much sisterly love for the red-headed woman as she did for Emily and found Margaret’s words once again ringing true. She had indeed inherited a beautiful family.

When Jenny saw Zeb, her face quickly lost its smile. “You,” she said.

She could see Zeb step behind her. “I am really beginning to hate that word.”

They all laughed and Jenny stepped up to him. “I forgive you. I more than anyone understand that sometimes life got to you to the point that you tend to act out of character. I heard of your apology and I am

passed that. Welcome to our home.”

Lenard stepped up and Zeb laughed. He remembered him clearly. On that fateful day in Mississippi he had swung a powerful punch at his face and it had connected. “Maybe we can go a few rounds one of these days,” he said.

Lenard bounced playfully on his feet as if preparing for a showdown. Laughter rang out in the group and little Peter poked his head out of the carriage.

“Shhhhh! You will wake my Bethany!”

They all laughed again as he disappeared but was soon hauled out by his father who introduced him and the bundle of joy he was busy protecting. Sara stood back as they all made their way into the Collard mansion. This was what happiness was all about and she just could not get enough of it.

“So you made it,” a familiar sultry voice said to her from the entrance of the foyer. She turned to look at Adele, smiling in only way an aristocratic woman could. “I was beginning to think you had lost yourself up North.”

They embraced and over her shoulders she could see Forrest with a kind of happiness in his eyes she had never seen before. Gone was the sad disposition. Before her stood a man who had stepped into the light and Lord knows he deserved it.

All was well in the world and she could feel Margaret smiling at them from some place in the distance.

All was well indeed.

* * *

BONUS SERIES

~ *A note from the Author* ~

As a token of appreciation to celebrate my second launch of the Boxed Set, I have included a BONUS SERIES for my beloved readers. This is the only Boxed Set that will include a Bonus Series.

As always, enjoy reading!

*With love,
~Faye Sonja*

THREE BRIDES FOR THREE WAR COMRADES

1

**LOST, ABANDONED & SECURED BY HER ONE-ARM
HERO**

ISABELLA

* * *

1871

Around her all Isabella could see was fire, flames that burned so hard they turned blue. Ash filled the air, and there was no sky visible. "Pa!" Isabella cried out, but her voice was drowned out by the sounds of fire crackling, people screaming, and wooden walls splintering before they crashed to the ground.

"Pa..." she tried to call again. "Get out, save yourself; don't worry about the practice, or me!" Isabella knew she was sturdy enough to find her way out of the burning wreckage on her own, but her father was elderly, his bones were weak, and his failing lungs wouldn't hold up under the thick smog and smoke.

But all she could hear was screaming, some of it coming from near, and some from far away, and all Isabella could think was, *"Who could be so cruel as to start a battle here, to light a whole town ablaze?"* Isabella had already lost two brothers to the war, and now she was terrified she was going to lose everything else she loved. Her ma, her pa, her town. Her medical practice.

"Perhaps he never came into the building," Isabella thought, clinging to this one hope. *"Maybe he's already made it out alive."*

She needed to get out, but the fog was thick and it blocked her eyesight as much as it clogged her throat. Isabella, a doctor by trade, knew that she needed to quickly find a way to cover her mouth, shield her lungs, and find some material to filter out the smoke so that her lungs didn't fill with ash. She dropped to her knees and ripped the

bottom of her long pale blue dress, then quickly made a mask of it.

She knew she needed to get fresh air desperately, that she didn't have long before the smoke choked her. The heat of the flames from twenty meters away was already turning her skin red, but she knew the smoke would kill her before the fire even reached her, if she didn't get out quickly. She only had minutes, perhaps seconds, before her lungs would collapse.

"Pa!" she called again, but there was no answer.

Isabella crawled till she hit a wall. She placed a palm up to it to check the temperature. Warm, but not blazing. She needed to get to the other side. She groped the wall as she stood up, her eyes shut tight due to the attack of smoke, till she found what she was looking for. A window.

Thank you God.

She ripped the material from around her mouth, and instead placed it around her hand. Then, balling her hand into a fist, she smashed through the glass till she had an escape route, and fresh air, at last. *Dear God, give me strength*, she prayed, as she hoisted herself up, through the window panel, and over the edge to safety.

There were cries as people ran over to her, but Isabella was silent, fallen to the floor, her eyes shut and her body limp, as a deep unconsciousness over took her.

* * *

One Month Later

Isabella took a step gingerly inside the building, which was now

barely a skeleton, with only parts of the frame remaining. Even the bare bones of the place seemed as though they would topple over at any moment.

"It's gone. All gone..." she murmured.

Her ma, an elderly woman of almost seventy, placed a shaking hand on Isabella's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my dear..."

Isabella spun around and saw that her ma was weeping. "Oh, don't cry for me, Ma. Or the practice. It can be rebuilt. We lost far greater things that day..."

Her mama squeezed her arm. "I just thank God one of those things wasn't you, Isabella, my darling daughter."

Isabella took a deep breath. She knew it was only by the grace of God, and her medical training, that she'd been saved that day. More than a dozen people had perished in the blaze, including her pa, and some of her cherished patients.

At age thirty-three, Isabella had seen more than her fair share of loss. She'd nursed countless patients through every sort of malady, fevers, pox, and influenza; though many had recovered and made it through to the other side thanks to Isabella's care, there were plenty who hadn't been strong enough, and who had found their peace with God, with Isabella by their side as they took their last breath. Then the war had come and loss become a daily part of life, as half the men in the town had left to fight, and half as many never returned.

But though Isabella was brave, her heart was not hardened, and the loss of her pa had hit her harder than any other.

Surveying her ruined medical practice, for the first time in her life, Isabella felt completely alone in the world.

* * *

Though the sun was high and the sky was blue, Isabella's spirits were low as she swept up the debris from her beloved medical practice, aided by her friend Charlotte, a young woman who'd worked as a secretary for the practice before she'd married.

"I never thought I'd see the place looking like this..." Charlotte murmured, picking through the wreckage for anything that might be salvaged.

"Neither did I," Isabella said. "I'm not needed here anymore, Charlotte. In fact, I don't think I'm needed anywhere." She spoke the words with grace and dignity, but Charlotte was not fooled by the tone. The words themselves were sad, and Isabella couldn't glaze over them with her stoic intonation.

The younger woman put a delicate hand on Isabella's arm. "Oh, that's silly talk," she said. "Of course you're still needed here."

"Why? Who needs me?" Isabella looked at her questioningly. She didn't like being patronized, even when the other person was being well-intentioned.

"Well, I...I suppose..." Charlotte stammered, having not expected such a question. She'd simply meant to offer Isabella a platitude, though she should have known Isabella would not easily be placated by kind words. Isabella was the sort of woman who spoke plainly and freely, and who appreciated truthful speech from others.

"See, there's no one who needs me. Not without the practice to take care of." Isabella looked down at her gloves and adjusted them at the wrists, before looking back up. She set her mouth firm and steady. "I'm not sure what's to become of me, now." She looked away from Charlotte, trying to conceal the emotion in her eyes.

"Now...now Isabella, you've still got your friends, and the Church...."

"But no family, no father, no brothers. And no job," Isabella said plainly. "Those are the facts."

"You may come and stay with Andrew and me for a while," the girl said, and Isabella appreciated the offer, but she shook her head.

"I don't want to put you out, to be a burden."

"You wouldn't be..."

"I would. There, now, there's nothing more to be said on the matter."

* * *

The next day Charlotte came to see Isabella with a note.

"What's this?" Isabella asked, not one to mince words. She liked to get straight to the point, so she had no hesitation taking the letter and quickly turning it over to have a read.

"Well, that's a preposterous idea," she murmured, once she'd reached the end. "Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Lots of women do this," Charlotte tried to explain. "Become mail order brides, I mean. The note was posted in one of the women's magazines I get. I always read them, just for a laugh, for a little bit of entertainment, but this one caught my eye. It seems perfect for you, Isabella."

"No women that I've ever heard of have done anything like this," Isabella said. "And it's certainly not for me, Charlotte, I'm afraid. I'm thirty-three now, far past the age for marrying."

Charlotte took the note back and folded it between her delicate fingers. "But in situations such as this, age is not a big deal. This man seems nice and kind, and he would be good for you. Plus, he is willing to marry you."

"Oh, well, I suppose I'd better leap at the opportunity," Isabella said, and Charlotte was taken back by the sarcasm in the other woman's voice. "You don't know that this man is either nice, or kind, Charlotte. What can you tell about him from a letter?"

Charlotte sighed and had to resist the urge to place her hands on her hips. Why did Isabella always have to be so obstinate? She couldn't see what was good for her even when it was right in front of her face.

"Isabella, this is a good opportunity for you. If you won't allow Andrew and me to take you in, what other options do you have?"

"I am thinking about building another practice," Isabella stated.

"With what money? Where will you get the funds?"

For once, Isabella didn't have an answer. She stood there as Charlotte continued to explain the situation to Isabella.

"Besides, this town that he lives in, White Elk, is said to be home to many war victims, many men who have been injured or scarred in the war," Charlotte said meaningfully. "Perhaps you may find some use down there."

"Really?" Isabella asked. She was interested in spite of herself. She already felt a tugging at her heart. "The name seems a little familiar, actually," she murmured, reaching back for the letter, glancing over the town name written down. "I wonder why I have heard of it before."

When Charlotte didn't answer, Isabella glanced up. "Why, Charlotte, it looks as though you've practically turned white! What is it?"

"Nothing," Charlotte said quickly, shaking her head. "I'm sure White Elk is a perfectly nice place. It's in the Rocky Mountains, and it's barely been touched by settlers."

Isabella frowned. "People do live there though, don't they?" She pointed to the letter. "This man who wants a wife - he lives there, obviously. It's not just him in a cave, all on his own, is it?"

"Not...exactly?"

"Not exactly? Well stop beating around the bush, Charlotte, and tell me what is wrong with this place. It clearly frightens you to even think about it! Yet you'd send me straight there if you had your way, to marry a man I've never even laid eyes on."

"There's more than one person who lives there, yes. It is a town. It's just...the people who live there are said to be strange."

"Strange? In what way?"

Charlotte shrugged. "They say the town is cursed, that there are strange creatures that live there, hidden in the woods. They say that the large lake that surrounds the town is haunted."

"Oh, nonsense," Isabella said. "That's silly superstition." It was one thing for Charlotte to be taken in by such stories - she was young and air-headed, and always had her head buried in one of those silly magazines she read, but it was another for Isabella - a grown woman, and one who practised a science, to be taken in by such nonsense.

Charlotte straightened up. "I knew you'd see it that way. You're not one to believe in such things, Isabella. That's why you'd do so well there."

"Now look, if I don't agree to marry this man, it's not because I've been scared off by some silly rumors..."

"Of course not," Charlotte said, smiling. "You would never be frightened by ghost stories."

Isabella felt cornered. Now, if she refused this man's offer of marriage, it would look as though she was too scared to move to White Elk. But that had nothing to do with it. The rumors and whispers meant nothing to her. Though, now that she recalled, some of the tales were pretty convincing...

She cleared her throat. "Leave the letter with me. I'll think about

it."

* * *

"I'm unwanted in this town. No reason for me to be here," Isabella thought that night, as she looked over the few scant items that had been salvaged from the site of the fire. A stethoscope, and a small tin basin, and some metal scissors were all that had survived that terrible blaze.

"How could I start over again, here, even if I wanted to? With only these three items?" With half the town bare - the buildings destroyed, and the men away fighting, it had become a ghost town. Most people had already packed their things in wagons and moved away to the nearest city. Isabella's ma already had plans to move in with her sister - Isabella's great aunt - on a large property thirty miles away. They'd offered to take Isabella as well, but it was no place for her. She'd only be ever-more isolated, and even less useful.

"I need a place where I can rebuild, practice medicine again. A place that needs me as much as I need them."

And White Elk Valley seemed to be that place.

* * *

KIT

* * *

1871

"Steady on, old man," Jedediah Irvine said. "You sure you ought to be doing that?"

Kit Greegeory snapped his head around, his wood axe balancing in his hand. "Oi there," he said, in a voice that was gruff, but with a teasing tone that only Jedediah would be able to detect. "I'm only eight years your senior. Hardly an old man. And there's no need to worry about whether I'm up for the job," he finished, turning back around to focus on the base of the tree he was chopping.

"Ah, I'm just trying to look out for ya," Jedediah said, as he watched the back of the man who'd saved his life three years earlier. That action had come at a price, Kit's left arm, in fact, and Jedediah watched guiltily as Kit struggled to work the axe with only his right arm.

"Looking out for me, or patronizing me?" Kit muttered, his back still turned to his younger comrade.

"You look tired, Kit. It's been a long day already. I can take over from here, work the rest of the shift if you want to go home and rest."

Kit straightened his back up and turned around, the axe swinging dangerously in the air. "I ain't tired, Jedediah. You think losing an arm makes me tire out more quickly?"

"Well I know it puts a greater strain on you. And I do feel

responsible for what happened to you, you know that," Jedediah added quietly.

"Nonsense. It was me who was in charge of all you young boys out on the field. My responsibility is to protect you. So you ain't allowed to go blaming yourself. I'd have done what I did for any of you boys."

"Even Thomas?" Jedediah asked, with a sly grin creeping onto his face.

Kit burst out laughing, glad that the tension had been broken with the topic of their younger friend. Thomas had been just seventeen when they'd gone out fighting, but now that the three of them were back in White Elk, Thomas was gunning for sheriff of the town, getting ideas far above his station, as far as Kit and Jedediah were concerned. "Yes, even Thomas...Though if I'd known he was going to turn out to be so much trouble, or to turn against you and me in the way that he has, trying to take control of this town..." Kit said, trailing off as he looked over his back at the small town they all called home.

White Elk could barely be called a town by most definitions. It had only the most basic of commodities and most of the residents, men like Kit and Jedediah who'd returned from the war, liked it that way. They lived and worked off the land, trading fur and wood from the forest, gathering their own food from the wood and water from the lake. The days were short of sunlight, but hard of labor, and, as far as Kit was concerned, losing an arm was no excuse not to continue putting in a hard day's work.

"Ya know," Jedediah said, interrupting Kit's thoughts. "You, me and young Thomas are going to have something in common again real soon, remember."

Kit heaved a deep breath. "Yeah, I know. Still can't believe it's really happening. Still haven't quite managed to wrap my head around it all."

"Well, you better hurry up," Jedediah said, picking his axe back up. "Because our wives are going to be here next week."

Kit nodded before returning to work, chopping in silence for a few minutes.

Jedediah noticed the change in his friend's demeanour, and asked, "You're not regretting going along with Thomas and I, are you, and sending for a bride? Because I think it's a bit late to change your mind now."

Kit shook his head slowly. "Not regretting." He sighed as he hit the last bit of trunk that caused the tree to break and fall. He stood out of the way as the tree hit the ground with an almighty thud that echoed through the woods.

Kit stood and admired his own work for a few seconds, glad that Jedediah was there to witness that Kit was still useful, that he needn't be forced into retirement just yet. "Just wary," he continued on, thinking about the bride he would be receiving the following week. He glanced back at the town again. "I just have to wonder what three new women are gonna do to this place," he murmured. "Some people say this ain't no place for women at all."

"Come now," Jedediah said, chuckling. "There are some women here, Kit."

"Some," Kit agreed, "But not many. And none of them are fancy

city girls like the type we'll be receiving."

"Worried they're going to change things too much, old man?"

"Hey, I already told ya, I ain't old. And yeah, to be honest with you. I am."

* * *

The sound of horse hooves thudding against the earth made Kit raise his head. He and Jedediah were enjoying the end of their hard day's work with a brew and a hearty soup, sitting out the front of the old shack that Kit called a house.

"Ah, it's Thomas," Kit grumbled. "Why's he always gotta make such a scene? Let everyone know he's arriving?"

Jedediah glanced up. "Ah no, and he's coming right this way as well."

Both Kit and Jedediah bristled as the younger man rode up to them before dismounting his horse and standing before them. He dipped his hat and greeted Kit and Jedediah as old friends.

"What do you want, Thomas?" Kit asked, cutting to the chase.

"Ah, just wanted to pop by and say hello," Thomas said, peering over Kit's shoulder to look inside his house.

"You never just want to say hello," Kit spat. "Just come out and tell us what you want."

"Town meeting, tomorrow night," Thomas said, stepping back and

giving his horse a pat on the back. "With the women arriving next week I think we need to get a few things in order."

Jedediah screwed up his face. "What things do we need to get in order? Place is fine as it is."

Kit agreed but he remained silent for a moment, keen to hear what Thomas had to say. He was certain he wasn't going to like it, whatever it was.

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Fine? Is that what you fellas call it?" He pointed over his shoulder to Kit's home. "I sure hope you're going to get this place in order before your bride arrives, Kit."

Kit crossed his arm over his chest. "First of all, son, this is my home and you've no right to tell me what to do with it. Second of all, what's wrong with the joint?" He sat back and looked over his shoulder at the dark little cottage. "Once Isabella arrives, she'll be at home to spruce the place up anyway."

"I'm to be sheriff of this town," Thomas said proudly, eliciting eye-rolls from the other two men. "So it is my place to say what does and doesn't need to be done. And your house, Kit, looks like it could collapse at any given moment. Are these really the sort of conditions you wish for your wife to live in? I demand that you fix it up immediately."

Kit had already had enough of Thomas's chat, so he stood up and placed his hat back on his head. "Listen, we'll be at that meeting tomorrow night, son, but this is the last I'll hear of you telling me what to do with my own property."

Hearing the menace in the older man's voice, Thomas took a step back towards his horse, then turned to climb back on. "Fine," he said, swallowing. "I'll expect you at the town hall at seven." He climbed back and rode off without a formal goodbye, and Kit and Jedediah turned to look at each other.

"You could actually clean the place up a bit," Jedediah pointed out. "I know you don't want to hear it from Thomas, but at least hear it from me. Our wives will likely end up being friends – they're travelling out here together – and I don't want her visiting a place that's unsafe."

Though Kit knew that was true, he didn't want to hear it from Jedediah either, so he stood up. "Time to go inside for the night I think."

"Aww, Kit, I was only saying what I thought needed saying"..."

Kit pushed his chair back, before exiting the porch. "Why don't you and Thomas go gossip between yourselves, then? You can talk about what a blight I am to this town, till you're both blue in the face."

"Kit, we don't talk about ya. No one does."

"I know what they all say about me in this town," Kit said, turning his back on his friend.

"Hey," Jedediah said, strolling over to him, laying a hand on Kit's back. "Don't pay any mind to what people in this town say. They're all mad anyway."

Kit turned back around. "Doesn't that make you and me mad as well?"

Jedediah chewed on his bit of hay and shrugged, chuckling a bit. "That's what they say about all of us in this town, don't they?"

* * *

THE THREE BRIDES ARRIVE

* * *

White Elk Valley, 1871

Isabella almost gasped as she first lay eyes on the lake, as her wagon pulled into White Elk. She wasn't prone to such strong displays, but the beauty of the lake, with its pristine deep waters and shimmering top, almost caused her to lose her breath.

"How can they make up such bad stories about a place as beautiful as this?" she wondered, clutching her bag. There was a chill in the air, blowing in from the mountains, across the lake, and she shivered a little.

"I suppose there is a certain eeriness about this place," she thought, looking around. But she said nothing to the other women, not wishing to look foolish in front of them. She could tell just from looking at them that she was a bit older than they were - the one with the pregnant belly looked to be about nineteen years old, for goodness sakes! - and she thought she should set an example.

The elder of the two - Susan, she was called, with long golden blonde hair and wearing modern, almost tom-boyish clothes - sat silently, taking in the view slowly, as though she was analysing it. The young girl with the baby - Mollie - was so preoccupied with her own thoughts, as she gazed down at her swollen belly, that she barely looked up.

"It feels as though we've been on this wagon forever," Mollie commented, finally bringing her face up, sticking her nose into the air. She sighed. "Doesn't look much fun out here."

"Who said anything about fun?" Susan asked, swinging down from the seat onto the ground. "I think it looks wonderful out here. Majestic, even. I could get lost out here."

"That's what people say..." Isabella murmured, temporarily forgetting that she was supposed to be setting the example. "They say people do get lost out here, that they disappear." She coughed and straightened herself up. "Silly, of course. If people get lost out here, they likely choose to do so."

Mollie nodded, her brown ringlets bouncing up and down. She had a pleasant, round face, pretty, with big brown eyes and plump lips. "They say all sorts of things about this place," she whispered.

"Oh, it's all nonsense, girls," Isabella said, taking control of the conversation. "Come now, we've all got much more important things to focus on now instead of silly stories."

The other two took her lead and followed her down the road to the town. There was a sign that directed them where to go, telling them that White Elk was one mile's walk East.

"I don't see why the wagon couldn't have taken us all the way," Mollie, grumbled, waddling down the path. "Our soon-to-be-husbands will be shocked to see us walking on our own like this. They'll have assumed the wagon would drop us at the church, as we agreed on."

"The driver still had a long journey ahead of him," Susan pointed out. "We should be grateful he took us as far as he did. Lucky we're not walking ten miles instead of one."

"Here," Isabella said, reaching out for the young, pregnant girl to

put her arm around her, so that Isabella was supporting her weight for her. "Come, lean on me," she said.

Mollie gratefully accepted the help. "Thank you, Isabella. I suppose you're used to taking care of people, aren't you?"

Isabella smiled, trying not to show the strain the girl's weight was having on her. She quickly prayed that she would be able to hold up for the rest of the walk.

Mollie kept talking. "I'm glad you arrived with us, Isabella. I was worried there wasn't going to be a doctor in town, no one to help me deliver."

"I'm not sure there already was a doctor," Isabella remarked, with a raise of the eyebrow. "In fact, I don't know what state this town is in, or what we're going to find when we get there..."

* * *

"Is this...it?" Mollie asked, as they reached the edge of the town of White Elk. Isabella put her down, now that they had a chance to stop and rest, and surveyed the small town.

"Doesn't even look like they have a doctor's practice here..." she murmured, unsure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. *"On the one hand, the people here might be ignorant about hygiene and medicine, and it might be difficult to get them to change their minds. On the other hand, it looks like I could be of great service to this town."* For Isabella, the small, strange town looked like nothing but a blessing. She was already pleased she'd made the long journey.

Mollie, grumbling next to her, seemed to think the opposite. "Where are we supposed to shop, for our dresses, and our garments?"

"We have to make our own here," Isabella said brightly. "I dare say the women around here won't be wearing fancy gowns. They'll be dressed in strong, industrious materials, made for lives spent working."

"Well, I won't be working," Mollie said, sticking her nose in the air.

"Of course not," Isabella chuckled, placing an arm around the girl. "Babies are no work at all..." she said, poking her tongue out.

Mollie smiled. "Okay, you've made a good point. I suppose I'll be working harder than I've ever worked in my life, in a few months' time." She sighed. "I just hope my husband, Thomas, will be around to help me out."

Susan, who'd been remarkably quiet up until this point, suddenly piped up. She reached a hand out to point down the road. "Is that them?" she asked, reaching a hand up to shield her eyes.

Isabella stopped and stared at the three men in the distance. Even from so far back, she could tell all three men were handsome, but all very different. One was young looking, maybe twenty years old or so, with fair hair and clean, well-tailored clothes. The second was a tall, dark haired man, of about twenty-five years, who walked with a definite swagger, as he led the way up the hill. Then there was the final man - tall, handsome in a gruff way, around thirty-three years old, wearing a leather hide jacket and black cowboy boots. Isabella knew that must be Kit, the man she was about to marry. She knew

because of one very important identifying attribute. In the letters they'd exchanged, Kit had told Isabella he'd been injured in the war, and that he'd needed a limb amputated.

"Yes," Isabella thought, taking a deep breath, for she knew her life was about to become very different. *"That's definitely him."*

* * *

The wedding ceremonies took place all at once, with the three brides and the three grooms marrying at the same time. Isabella was grateful for this, as she'd bonded with Susan and Mollie during the long journey, and having them beside her calmed her nerves.

Still, she hardly knew what to say to Kit Greegeory when they first met. "You must be Isabella," he said, immediately picking her out of the three women. She realized she must have described herself well - golden hair somewhere between blonde and brown that she wore in a sensible style, tall, with pale grey-blue eyes and soft delicate features. She hoped he recognized her based on her good description, not on her age. *"Then again, he could hardly have confused me with Mollie,"* she thought.

Isabella tried to hide her nerves by looking directly at Kit. As a doctor, she was used to dealing with men, and didn't regard them as foreign, strange creatures as a lot of women did. Still, looking directly into his eyes only made her more nervous, and she dipped her head before he could see her blush. She felt like she'd been suddenly reduced to a silly, giggling girl.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Kit," she said, keeping her head bowed, and her voice low.

"I hope so, Isabella. Seems like I've been waiting for you an awful long time. I'm so glad you're finally here."

She smiled, then dared to lift her head again. Kit Greegeory had kind eyes, if you really looked, but there was also a weariness to his face, more lines than you'd expect to find on a man of only thirty-three, and a hardness to his lips that only disappeared when he smiled. But he was smiling right then, and Isabella felt at ease. Not like she had arrived in a foreign place, but like she'd arrived home.

* * *

Kit had to wear his wedding band on his right hand, which he assured Isabella was alright. "As long as we're married in the eyes of God, it's all official, isn't it? Don't matter which finger the wedding ring goes on."

"Of course not," Isabella replied quickly, smiling.

As the pastor performed the ceremony for the three grooms and the three brides, Isabella looked down at her own wedding band, placed on her left hand. She saw Kit look down at it and asked him if everything was alright.

"Of course," he said, taking her hand, and smiling gently. "Just thinking...that it's odd we will wear our bands on different hands."

Isabella thought for a second, then, giving a quick glance at the pastor and the other newlyweds, quickly took her band off her left hand, and placed it on her right. Mollie stared at her, wide-eyed, while Susan smiled and shot her a nod.

"There," Isabella stated, grinning up at Kit. "Now we match."

* * *

But Isabella did have questions she wanted to ask. She had a forward manner about her that could be endearing, and helped to put her patients at ease, but she worried she might be too forward for her new husband, if she started asking personal questions right away.

It wasn't until they reached the cottage that she spoke up. "Kit, if you don't mind me asking, how do you work?" She waited for the response as she saw a strange look creep across his face.

"I do just fine, don't worry about that," he said.

"Oh," she said, taken aback. "I didn't mean to suggest you can't work. I just...wanted to know, how you manage it?"

"Only need one arm to swing an axe, don't ya?"

"Isn't that a little dangerous though?"

"Jedediah helps me out," he said, flatly.

"Oh. Okay then." Isabella could tell it was a sensitive topic, so she dropped it and turned her attention to the small house. "It's very cozy," she said, brightly.

Kit looked pleased. "You like it then? Some of the men were saying you wouldn't."

"I love it. It's clean, and tidy, and it will do us plenty good."

He looked relieved to hear her say this. "I cleaned it up good before ya got here. Jedediah said I oughta. Looks like it was worth it though, from your reaction."

Isabella wondered about the influence Jedediah had on Kit. It looked like it was a good influence, so far, but she'd met the man earlier and wondered if he would always lead him in such a good direction. *"Anyway,"* she thought, *"I can worry about that later. It's time to settle in now."* She glanced around the small kitchen, with its old stove and rickety dining table.

"Now you're here I suppose the place will look even better," Kit commented.

"Oh?" Isabella replied, absentmindedly. "Why's that?"

"Well, you'll be around the house, tidying, cleaning. Looking after things here."

Isabella stopped. "I intend to work, Kit." She smiled brightly at him and exited, to check out the remaining rooms.

Kit stopped and stared after her, his mouth wide open. Totally lost for words.

* * *

"What was that?" Isabella asked, grabbing her blankets around her. Kit was nowhere to be seen. The growling sound came again. *"Come now, it's probably nothing,"* she told herself. *"I've only been living out in the woods for a few weeks, and already I'm hearing things."*

She wondered to herself if there really might be something to the

rumors. It was one thing to scoff when she was hundreds of miles away, but now that she was here she could feel a definite eeriness to the place. The way the lake sat so still and deep, like it was full of secrets. Secrets that the branches of the trees in the woods seemed to catch, rustling with their own secret language.

She heard a banging in the wind, and the next thing Kit was coming in through the door, looking bruised and battered after a hard day's work. "What's wrong with you?" he asked, noticing the way Isabella was shaking, with her blanket pulled up to her chin.

She shook her head and attempted a smile. "Oh, nothing. Just being silly. I could have sworn I heard a growling sound coming from the woods."

Kit flicked her a grin. "Not afraid of monsters, are you Isabella?"

She let out a soft laugh. "No, of course not."

Kit sat down and took his boots off, laying them in front of the fire to dry off. "How about bears?"

"Bears?" Isabella asked, her voice hushed. "Oh, please tell me you're joking Kit."

He laughed. "Not around here. Just don't go too far into the woods. Come now, it's time to turn in."

But Isabella didn't get a wink of sleep that night. She wasn't sure what possibility was worse: that there were monsters in the woods, or that there were bears.

ISABELLA'S ANNOUNCEMENT

* * *

White Elk, 1871, One Month Later

"Ahem," Isabella said, clearing her throat. She was standing in front of their dining room table, where Kit was enjoying his breakfast of bread and apricot preserves. He glanced up at her, mid-mouthful.

"You look like you got something to say."

"I do," Isabella said, her voice clear and plain. She'd carefully rehearsed the words she was about to say to Kit, till she was confident and strong in her resolve. "I've decided, Kit, that I'm to return to work here, in White Elk."

He dropped his piece of bread and stared up at her. "What do you mean by that, Isabella? You don't work, now that you're my wife. You'll do just fine here at home." He furrowed his brow. "Do you think that I am unable to provide for you?"

She'd anticipated his reaction, so she continued to speak confidently. "Kit, I know that you are able to provide for us on your own, and I appreciate that. But I believe the town of White Elk needs me, and I believe that I can do a lot of good out here."

He narrowed his eyes. "Doing what exactly?"

"Well, practicing medicine, of course." This was one part that she hadn't anticipated. She'd assumed that Kit would know that she would want to continue to work as a doctor - not as some sort of seamstress, or maid, or whatever it was he was guessing.

He shook his head, as he picked up his piece of bread and went back to chewing. "And how do you suppose you're going to do that?"

"There's a small empty shop in town, and I believe it will do splendidly as a small practice. Patients can come and visit me as they see fit, and after some time I'll be able to make visits to people's homes, if they are too ill, or elderly, to make the trip in."

Kit scoffed, as Isabella continued. "Susan is going to help me - she's smart and industrious, and she can see what needs to be done. With a fresh coat of paint, and a woman's touch, I think the building will be perfect."

"No," Kit said, finishing up his bread and pushing the plate away from him.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Isabella asked. She'd guessed Kit would be against the idea, that his pride would get in the way, but she hadn't thought he would issue her with a flat 'no'. *"Who does he think he is talking to, a child?"* Isabella thought. *"He can't tell me yes and no - yes I will respect his opinions on issues, now that we are married, but he can't simply tell me what to do."*

"We don't need no fancy medicine practice around here," Kit said, as though that was the end of the subject. "People will think you're trying to push your modern ideas onto them."

Isabella opened her eyes wide. "Everyone needs medicine Kit, and access to medical care. There's a young girl in town now, pregnant with a baby. Soon there'll be a small child living here amongst us. Who do you suggest take care of them? Or should they just hope to survive, and pray they never get sick, or injured?"

"You've got it, Isabella - God takes care of us out here. We don't need this medicine nonsense."

Isabella took a small breath and chose her words carefully. "Of course God takes care of us. I've no doubt of that. But one of the ways he takes care of us - of you, me, and young Mollie and her baby - is by sending doctors to help him, to do His work for him here on Earth."

Kit shook his head. "We've done just fine so far."

Isabella turned around and kept tidying, moving briskly around the house. "Yes, well, that was before you had women living here. Babies and families to worry about. It's time for a change here in White Elk, and I intend to see it happen."

* * *

"Wow," Susan said, stunned as she admired the shiny new building in front of her. "I'll say one thing - this sure stands out in this town." She turned to Isabella. "If I do say so myself, I think we've done a wonderful job. You especially. I've been away while you've done the final round of renovations, and I didn't expect to come back to find it looking this good."

"Yes, well, I don't think anything else around here has seen a fresh coat of paint in years," Isabella said, opening the front door. "Come in, take a look."

"When I say it stands out, I mean it stands out in a good way," Susan commented, taking a step inside. The smell of fresh paint hit her nostrils, as she took in the clean, sparkling exterior. "This will be a welcome change for the town. The beginning of a new era, I dare say."

"I certainly hope so," Isabella murmured. "Now, if we could only get the men to see it that way."

"They'll come around..." Susan said, walking through from the reception area to the doctor's office. "We just need to give them some time. Let them get used to the idea."

Isabella followed her into the room, less convinced. "They've had time - all their lives, to come around! That's the problem; too fixed in their ways, the lot of them."

Susan pondered for a minute, quiet, lost in her thoughts. "It must be difficult for them, to adjust though."

"Do you mean adjust to the idea that they've got wives to worry about now, not just themselves?" Isabella asked.

"Mmm, yes, that as well," Susan mewed. "But I think the men have trouble being back home, after fighting in the war. Kit and Jedediah, especially." She stopped and turned to Isabella. "What with their injuries, and everything."

Isabella hung her head. "Yes, that must be true. I ought to learn to be more understanding and patient with Kit when he gets his back up. Perhaps he is against change because he's been through so much of it. Losing an arm must be a terrible burden. Perhaps he just wants some things to stay the same."

"Don't be hard on yourself, Isabella. I'm sure you are plenty calm and patient with the man."

"Yes, well, I can always try to be better."

Susan brightened up and waved around the doctor's office. "We can all try to be better. And with a practise like this in town, we're all going to do much better."

* * *

Isabella beamed at her first patient. "Hello there, sweetheart," she said, bowing down so that she was on eye level with the small boy, who must have been only four or five by the looks of him. Scrawny, too.

His mother, a thin women wearing a dirty bonnet and old clothes, looked worried. "I don't think he's been quite right," she said, her voice hushed.

"Well, what seems to be the problem?" Isabella asked, switching her attention back to the boy. He had bony knees and grubby hands and feet.

"He's had no appetite, upset stomach..." the women said, her voice nervous." My husband didn't want me coming down to see you. Thinks all this medicine stuff is nonsense."

Isabella sighed. "I'm not sure what's the matter with the men in this town. Between you and me I think we need to drag them into the modern age, whether they want to come or not. Now, listen, you've done the right thing bringing Teddy in to see me. You're right - he's not looking well."

"What's wrong with him?" The mother asked, her face tight with anxiety.

"I'll dare guess he's been drinking fresh water from the lake, without any sterilisation," Isabella said, raising an eyebrow at the boy. "Does that sound right?"

"Well, yes," the women admitted, her face a picture of surprise. "I didn't think there was any problem giving him water from the lake - it's clean, isn't it?"

"Fresh, yes," Isabella commented, picking up her stethoscope so she could have a better listen at the boy's chest. "Clean is another matter entirely."

The woman brought a trembling hand up to her mouth as she used the other to soothe her son's head, stroking his thin hair. "I had no idea. Oh, I'm mighty sorry I ever gave him that water."

"Now there, you weren't to know," Isabella said. "You were only doing what you believed was best by your boy. There's no sense in feeling guilt and shame, if you didn't even know it was wrong."

"What should I do now?" the boy's mother asked, as she picked him up and sat him on her lap.

"All water that comes from the lake needs to be sterilized before it can be drunk. That means it needs to be cleaned, to rid it of germs and bacteria."

The women looked confused. Isabella had to wonder for a moment how the population of White Elk had managed to survive at all, they were so shrouded in ignorance, unaware of how to practise even the most basic of hygiene. But it was a remote, insular place, where superstition ran rife.

"You can sterilize it by boiling it on the stove, or over a fire?"

"But won't it be too hot to drink?"

Isabella smiled gently. "Yes. You'll need to wait for it to cool."

The women laughed a little and turned her head down, embarrassed. "Of course. Thank you so much for your help, Doc. I'm so relieved to know that it's something that I can fix, that Teddy won't need to suffer any longer."

"He will need plenty of fluids," Isabella said. "To get back into peak condition. Just make sure those fluids are clean and safe to drink."

The woman nodded and Isabella said goodbye to her and her son, a warm feeling flushing through her stomach. *"Well, the first patient out of the way! That calms the nerves down a little,"* she thought. *"And it couldn't have gone better."*

She was feeling very pleased with herself as she waved her second patient in, till there was suddenly an awful commotion outside and the front door flew open, then a man came bustling in.

"Kit?" Isabella said. "What are you doing here?" She looked around at her patients, trying to gauge their reactions to this large man heaving his way inside, covered with pine needles all over his clothes, and mud on his boots. "Is everything alright?" she whispered, desperate to avoid a scene.

"No, it's not!" he bellowed. "The front door was left open at home, and the entire front half of the house is flooded with rain water! No

one was there to see it, or to fix the problem, Isabella, All the items in the front room are ruined!"

Isabella turned, with her mouth wide open, to look at her patients, attempting to apologize to them while Kit was still yelling at her, in complete ignorance of the fact that he was causing a scene.

"Isabella, you need to come home at once and tend to this matter," he said, placing his hand on his hip. Around them, the other people tried not to look directly at the couple, embarrassed to be witnessing a private argument made so public.

Isabella contorted her lips into a thin smile and said, as calmly as she could, "Kit, let's talk about this in my office. Sorry everyone, I'll be back out with you in just a few moments, if you could just excuse me."

Kit followed her into the room and Isabella shut the door behind them.

"How could do this to me Kit, how could you embarrass me like this?" Her voice came out in a furious whisper, and she felt the blush of crimson creep up her cheeks till her entire face was flushed red. "And on my first day. What must they all think of me now?"

"Embarrass you?" Kit was indignant. "It's you who's making me look like the fool around here, Isabella."

She slammed her stethoscope down on the table, knocking the dish next to it. "How exactly have I done that?"

"When I tell you not to do something, and you do it anyway, like coming to work here, it makes me look stupid. Like I can't control my

own wife. Like I'm less of a man! You should hear what the other men are saying about me. Then you go out and neglect all your household chores, and a disaster happens like today!"

Isabella's jaw was wide open, aghast at what she was hearing. "I am not someone you control, Kit! I make my own decisions, and if you can't handle that, or are too ashamed to be married to a woman like me, then maybe this was all a huge mistake."

"You got that right."

Isabella wasn't easily stung by her husband's words, though a lot of women would have been very hurt to hear a man say such a thing, to agree that marrying her had been a huge mistake. She recognized that Kit was speaking in anger, and that he didn't mean what he was saying.

She took a step closer to him. "Why don't you just admit what your real problem is with me opening this practice?"

"I've already told ya," Kit said. "We don't need no doctors around here."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's it at all. Yes, you are silly and superstitious about modern medicine, but that's not the full truth of the matter, is it? That's not what makes you so angry."

"Well what is it then, huh? If you think you know what it is, just come out and say it."

"I think you don't like seeing a women work. You don't want me out in the world, working, earning a living, because you think my

place is at home." She stood indignant, waiting for her husband to answer.

He stood and stared at her for a moment, blinking slowly. "Okay, yes, you're right."

"I thought so..."

He cut her off with an angry remark. "It does make me look bad, Isabella. It makes it look as though I can't support you."

"It's got nothing to do with whether you can support me or not, Kit. It has nothing to do with you at all. This is about my place in the world, and my contribution to it. About me feeling needed, and wanted."

"I need you, Isabella. I need you to stay home and..."

"And to do what I'm told?" Isabella asked. "That's it, isn't it? Well, that's not enough for me, and not the way I want to live my life."

Kit shook his head. "So I'm not enough for you, is that what you're saying?" His eyelids hung low, and there was a sad, distant look in his deep brown eyes.

Isabella softened. "No, Kit, that's not what I'm saying. It's not about one person being enough. As a husband, you are enough for me. But I need more than that. More than just staying at home and being useless..."

Kit looked down. "I still don't see why you needed to open up this place. You say you want to be needed - well, this town don't need a place like this."

Isabella crossed her arms. "I'll have you know you're wrong about that, Kit. Dead wrong. There was a child in today suffering from malnutrition and dehydration, because neither he nor his mother understood about not drinking the water from the lake. The poor little boy could have died! Can you really say that medical advice isn't needed here? Would you rather see children sick, or dying?"

"No of course not," Kit said, his voice also softening. "Nobody wants to see that, least of all me."

"Then you can see I am needed. I am doing good work here today. Or at least I was, till you came blustering in, ruining all of it."

"I'm sorry," Kit said, hanging his head. "I wasn't aware little kids were getting sick around here."

Isabella walked over to her husband and placed a hand on his arm. "I know you weren't. Half the problem is the ignorance around here, after all. And I know you'd never want any harm to come to anyone. Kit, please, I need you to see that I can do good work here. As my husband, I need your support."

He nodded. "I understand, Isabella. I've been foolish, I know that. I'm sorry about the way I burst in here today. Must have looked awful odd to those people out there, and made you seem unprofessional. I'll apologize on my way out. And Isabella, I'll try my best to support you from now onwards."

* * *

KIT'S CHANGE OF HEART

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White Elk, 1871, One Month Later

"Is that a cough I hear?" Isabella asked, peering over at Kit, who was trying to hide his wheezing by using his hand to conceal his mouth.

"It's nothing," he said, waving her away. "Now go on, my dear, you're going to be late."

"Why don't you come in to my practice today, to see me about it?" Isabella finished buttoning up her coat and reached across to the hat stand to grab her hat.

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. It's nothing to go fussing over."

"Kit. You said you would support me and the practise from now on."

"I am supporting you, but that doesn't mean I have to go in there myself. Not for such a small thing as a cough."

"Well what if it gets worse? How are you going to manage it?"

"It won't get worse," Kit replied. "I rarely ever get sick, and when I do it don't last for long. I've never needed a doctor before and I don't need one now."

Isabella stood in the doorway for a moment, watching him in silence. She looked at his left shoulder, where his arm was amputated

above the elbow. *"Surely he's seen a doctor at some stage in his life, with an injury like that? Who else would have performed the operation? But he refuses to talk about it, so I can't ask. But why would he say he's never been to a doctor when he clearly has?"*

She was suddenly shaken from her thoughts by thunder banging, rumbling in from over the mountains, and she remembered she was running late and needed to make a move. "You take care then, Kit. And if it gets much worse you come and see me."

"Not much chance of that."

* * *

"Oh bother," Isabella thought, running to try to get out of the rain, as she pulled her hat down to shield her face from the icy raindrops that tried to pierce her skin. *"With weather like this, Kit's cough is only going to get worse. Why does he have to be so stubborn?"*

She raced along, her purple skirt flowing behind as she tried to make it inside before there was a total downpour and her outfit was ruined. She didn't think it would look very professional if she did her day's work in a soaking wet dress.

"Isabella!" a voice called out from up ahead. Squinting in the rain, Isabella looked up to see Mollie waiting for her outside her practice. "Hurry!"

Isabella chuckled as she called out, "I'm trying! Trust this weather to turn nasty the first day I start making house calls."

Finally reaching the shelter, she ushered Mollie inside. "Did you

not know that I'm beginning house calls today? You didn't need to come all the way down here, my dear, not in your condition." She glanced down at Mollie's heavy belly, which was growing bigger by the day.

"Yes, I know you're making house calls now," Mollie said as Isabella helped her into a chair. "But I didn't want Thomas to know anything was wrong."

Isabella frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Mollie looked uncertain. "I don't know if I'm just worrying for nothing, but I've been getting these pains in my stomach."

Isabella tried not to look too concerned, as she didn't want to frighten the younger woman. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Let me have a look, though."

* * *

"You look exhausted," Kit said, greeting Isabella as she came home through the door.

"Been a long day," she said wearily, her dress still damp from the storm, and her hair stuck to her forehead.

"House calls?" Kit asked, as he started to make a pot of tea. "How did they go?"

"They were fine..." Isabella murmured. "It was actually one of my patients who came to see me at the practice that got me worried though."

Kit frowned. "What happened?"

Isabella took a seat, glad to finally rest her legs. "I shouldn't say too much, really. Just a little worried about her and the baby. She was having pains, and something didn't seem quite right."

Kit placed a cup of tea in front of Isabella, before he burst out in a coughing fit.

"Kit!" Isabella exclaimed. "Has your cough got worse? I told you to come and see me if it didn't get better."

"It's nothing. It's been fine. I don't need no doctor anyway."

Isabella threw her hands up. "I've left all my equipment behind as well. If I'd known I could have brought my bag home with me. Do you want me to go back? I can pick up some medicine as well, something to soothe the cough."

Kit shook his head. "No, you're exhausted, Isabella. I'm fine. Don't go back out in the cold and rain for me."

"I think I should," she said, making a move to stand up.

Kit put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Isabella, please, I can't bear to see you go out again with the state you're in. You'll end up sicker than I am."

"Hmm - so you do admit you're sick then?"

Kit sighed. "I just need a good night's rest. So do you."

He turned around to take the pot off the boil, and by the time he

turned back to Isabella, she was already fast asleep.

* * *

Isabella was awoken that night, not by the sounds of the howls and whistles coming from the woods, but by her husband's coughing and spluttering.

"That's enough, Kit," Isabella said, putting her foot down. "If you won't seek medical care for your own sake, at least do it to put me out of my misery. I can't put up with one more sleepless night like this!"

"I've told you already..."

"I don't care. If you weren't so darn superstitious, and maybe open to change - or open to any new ideas at all - maybe you wouldn't be so scared of coming to the practice!"

Kit turned around slowly, a flash of anger in his eyes. "I'm not scared Isabella. I'm no coward!"

"I know you're not," Isabella replied quickly, her voice gentle. "I didn't mean to suggest that. I know you're very courageous, in many ways. But a man who is brave in battle can be a fool off the battle field. I don't know how you could have survived a war, and yet still remain so petrified of a little trip to the doctor."

Kit turned and walked out the door, slamming the door behind him. But not before he shouted, "Fine! I'll see you there first thing in the morning!"

Isabella smiled, pleased with herself. A small victory, maybe, but to Isabella it felt like a big one. She was finally getting through to Kit,

chipping away at his exterior piece by piece.

* * *

"There, that wasn't so bad now, was it?" Isabella asked, taking the stethoscope away from Kit's chest. "I mean, I know this thing can be a bit cold, but it's hardly torture, is it?"

Kit gave her a skeptical look. "So what do you think is wrong with me, Doctor?"

Isabella gave him a little smile. "Nothing too serious, I don't think. There's a little bit of fluid in the lungs, which can be remedied if you take a bit of rest."

"How am I supposed to rest? With you here at work all day, who's going to take care of the property? We need wood, for one thing, or else we'll freeze to death."

"We'll get by for a few days. There's plenty of spare firewood to last us, and I can help out a little around the yard for a few days."

"You're already doing too much," Kit commented.

"I'm happy to do it." Isabella placed one hand on her hip, gazing at this stubborn man of hers. "Can you just let me take care of you for once, Kit? It's like pulling teeth Kit, trying to get through to you."

"I don't need you to look after me," Kit snapped, pulling his jacket back on as he leapt off the bench he'd been sitting on.

"Right now you do," Isabella said, trying to sound gentle, trying to diffuse the situation. She could see that something she'd said had

rattled her husband, and he had that fiery look in his eyes again. "Just for a few days."

"I don't need any looking after! You hear me? Especially not by you," he yelled.

"Kit," she reprimanded him. "Hush! I have other patients waiting for me in the next room. You're causing an almighty scene, you do realize? People will gossip about us, say that we argue, talk about our private business, for crying out loud."

"I don't care about any of that," Kit said, reaching out for his hat.

"Of course you don't. You don't care what may affect me. Just because you are used to living a life with no manners or decency, you don't need to bring me down to that level. I'm a respected person in this town, and I don't wish for others to hear our private business. And I don't wish for you to talk to me in such a way, Kit."

He was quiet for a moment or two, adjusting his hat and jacket, seeming like he was trying to clam himself down. "Alright Isabella, fair enough. But you've got to understand that I don't like to be babied and coddled. I don't need it!"

"I hardly think I am coddling you by suggesting you need a bit of bed rest, with a cough as bad as you've got. I think you're being ridiculous, Kit. In fact, I think you're a ridiculous man altogether, at times."

Kit thrust his right shoulder forward. "This is it - this is why you treat me this way, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?" She glanced over at the right shoulder, at the missing place where the limb should have been. "Kit, that has nothing to do with anything."

He scoffed. "Yeah right! You think just because I'm missing my arm, that I need to be taken care of, that I can't do things myself."

"I do not think that." Isabella spoke quietly now. No longer because she was worried about others overhearing, but because she felt sudden sorrow, guilt that her husband was feeling like this. She had not meant to make him feel bad, or like less of a man, just because he was missing a limb. She'd simply wanted to make sure his cough didn't turn into a fever, or pneumonia. "Kit, is this really what you think? I don't believe that you need special treatment, or that you can't provide for us."

"Yes you do," he said, his voice low, hanging his head. "You said last night, that you think I'm scared, a coward. Too scared to come to a doctor's office, for crying out loud."

"I do not think you're a coward, Kit Greegeory. Not for any reason, and certainly not because of your injury. I think such a thing makes you brave. It makes you a hero."

She took a step closer to him, hoping to get closer, to share an embrace, to end the fight, but Kit kept his head hung, and refused Isabella's advances. "It sure don't feel like that."

"Kit, if you could just let me explain." Once again she was frustrated by the stubbornness her husband displayed. Refusing to do things even when they were for his own good. Refusing her apology and explanation even when they could help to repair the damage, to

end the feud.

He raised his head back up, straightened himself up, and walked towards the door. "I'll take the medicine you prescribed me, but I won't lay in bed wasting away for a week, I can tell you that now!"

* * *

A STEP BACKWARDS

* * *

White Elk, 1871, One Week Later.

"Seems as though you're feeling a lot better," Isabella said, beaming up at Kit.

Kit smiled. "I have to admit, that medicine of yours did me some good."

Isabella couldn't prevent the smile that spread across her face. "See, this medicine stuff isn't so strange after all, is it?"

Kit reached his left arm around and pulled Isabella in for a hug. "You're doing a lot of good in this town, Isabella. The town needs you."

Isabella kept her face hidden for a moment or two, so that her husband couldn't see how proud she was to hear that. She had secretly started to hope that she was making a difference to the people in White Elk, to the children, to Mollie and her baby, but she hadn't dared to feel too boastful about it. But it was so lovely to hear the words come from Kit - especially when he was the last person in the world to admit when he was wrong!

She pulled her head back. "No, it's nothing," she said. "I'm just doing what I can, helping out. I just go where God needs me, and he brings the people to me. I don't do much."

"You're too humble, Isabella. Everyone in this town loves you. They're grateful that you came, and all the healthier for it, too."

She felt a blush of red creeping up her cheeks. "Stop now," she said, reaching out for her bonnet. "I need to get to work, anyway, so that's enough of your praise."

Kit reached out his hand and stopped her gently. "There's one other person who's grateful that you came here, Isabella."

"Now who's that then?" she asked, bowing her head.

"Me," Kit replied firmly.

"Now, you're only saying that because I fixed your nasty cough."

"That's not the only reason Isabella. I don't know what I would do without you now."

* * *

Jedediah walked up the hill towards the hills with a heavy gait. "Good to see ya back at work here old man," he said, grinning as he reached Kit, giving him a slap on the back.

"Wanted to come back days ago, but Isabella was adamant that I needed more time in bed."

"Must be a pain, married to a woman who's also a doctor. Bet you don't get much peace 'round at your place. Always having to hear about these fancy new inventions and whatnot. Bet she's been pushing that new medicine on to you."

Kit shook his head. "It's not so bad. My cough cleared up real fast."

Jedediah raised an eyebrow. "Know what else would have done

that? Good fresh air out here. But you've been wasting away indoor for days instead."

"Well I'm back now," Kit said, "and I've recovered completely. I'm feeling better than ever, actually."

Jedediah stopped and looked at this man he knew so well, the one he had served beside in battle. Something was different about his face, almost like there were less lines on it like the skin was younger. "You're not going soft on me, are ya Kit? I thought you were dead set against all this modern science?"

"Isabella has shown me that there's good that can come of it. That's it's not always something to be scared of..." Kit's voice trailed off as the flashbacks of days long gone threatened to intrude.

Jedediah cleared his throat, also desperate to avoid a trip down memory lane. "Well, if you ask me, it's a load of old hog wash."

They continued their work in silence for a good while, chopping away at the base of a pine tree. "So how much longer is Isabella going to work for?"

"What do you mean?" Kit said.

"How much longer you going to let her go out and earn money, allow her to spend so much time away from the home?"

"I don't 'let' her do anything. It's not my place to tell her what she can and can't do. And I don't see any reason why she won't stay working for as long as she can. As long as she wants to."

"Wow," Jedediah said. "You really have changed, Kit."

Kit threw his axe down and rubbed his temples. "Yeah, well maybe I have. And maybe it's about time we all did. We could do with some change around here."

* * *

Kit worked amicably for the rest of the day, but on the walk home Jedediah's words started to echo in his mind. He tried to clear his head, but he kept picturing Jedediah's disapproving scowl, and the way he'd spoken about Isabella.

"Is this what all the men - my men - think of me now? That I've lost control of my own household, that I'm no longer the man of the house?" His footsteps got heavier as he continued to dwell on the conversation.

"Do people really speak about us? The woodsman, and his doctor wife? Do they think she's peculiar, too modern?" Kit was starting to come around to Isabella's way of seeing the world, but now he realized that the rest of the town was still far behind. All they saw was an odd woman, with a too-forward manner and a straight way of talking.

A woman with a job.

And not just a woman's job, either. Some of the other ladies in town worked as governesses, or maids, but none of them were doctors. Nurses, perhaps, during the war, but not doctors.

The more he stewed on it the more he became convinced that he was now the town laughing stock. Jedediah and Thomas must barely recognize the man who had led them on the battlefield. That brave, courageous man was now reduced to a life chopping wood, with only one arm, and a wife who was out of the house, making a fool of him.

When he finally reached the house that evening his mood was dark.

"How was your first day back at it?" Isabella asked kindly, offering to place his boots by the fire for him.

Kit shrugged. "Not much to report," he said dismissively.

"Well, how did you feel out there? Did your cough give you any trouble?"

"My cough's fine," he snapped. "Always was. And no, it didn't give me any trouble, and you know why? Because I was out in the fresh air, like God intended. The air is better medicine than any of your fancy syrups."

"Kit, what's gotten into you?" Isabella asked, appalled at her husband's bad mood.

"Nothing," he grumbled, taking a seat by the fire and picking up his pipe.

"You're not going to smoke, are you?" Isabella asked. "Not in the house, Kit, I won't allow it."

He slammed the pipe back down. "You don't get to decide what's allowed in this house, Isabella! I decide. And I've had enough of you lecturing me about my heath, and my habits as well. It's not your place to tell me what to do."

Isabella stood there with her mouth hanging open, hardly able to believe this bad attitude Kit had come home with. "It's not my place to worry about my husband, is that what you're saying? I'm not allowed

to worry that you're keeping well, or to be concerned when you're ill? Is that it? I've never heard anything so ridiculous."

"You don't need to worry about me. Always making problems when there aren't any."

"Kit, I thought we were past all of this." Isabella threw her hands up in the air. "I thought I'd broken through to you a little, chipped away at some of your ignorance. Now it looks like we're back at square one! Why are you talking like this?"

"No reason."

"Did Jedediah say something to you?"

Kit turned his head and stared at her for a moment, his eyes dark and heavy. "I am able to make my mind up about things, and form my own opinions without another man telling me what to do, you know. I was in charge of Jedediah down on the battlefield, remember, not the other way around!"

"Yeah, well it sounds like he's gotten to you. Started filling your head with all this superstitious nonsense again." Isabella walked to the other side of the room and began to fold some laundry.

"He did tell me something interesting," Kit said. Now that he was worked up he was speaking without thinking, and he immediately wished he hadn't said that.

Isabella put down the sheet she was holding. "Oh, did he just? What's that then?"

"He says it looks funny, you out in the world, having a job."

Kit turned his head away so that her reaction was hidden from him. He knew he'd said the wrong thing and he was ashamed, sorry that he'd brought up this argument again.

"So that's what this is all about, is it?" Isabella asked, her voice flat and heavy. She let out a bitter laugh and threw a handful of laundry into the wicker basket. "I knew it. You still can't get used to the idea that I might be my own person, with my own life and ambitions. I'm not just an extension of you, Kit. Not everything I do reflects on you, either. In one way you are so independent, and oblivious to the ways of the world, yet in another way you care too much what everyone else is thinking and doing!"

Kit just stood there in silence.

"Why do you worry about what others think?" Isabella asked. "Why does it matter if they think it's odd that I work, or that I'm a doctor? I'm helping to save people's lives, Kit. And I think that's a darn sight more important than some idle gossip!"

Kit hung his head. "I know," he said quietly. "You're right. It is."

"What does it matter what Jedediah says, anyway? You pay too much mind to his opinion." Isabella shook her head. "If anyone should change their job, it should be you, Kit! So that you can keep some distance from that man."

"Jedediah's alright," Kit said softly. "I served alongside him. I'm not gonna just cut him out of my life."

"Keeping some distance from him might be a good thing," Isabella said. "Or am I overstepping my mark again, telling you what you can

and can't do?"

Kit sighed. "Isabella, I didn't mean what I said..."

"Yes you did," she shot back quickly. She walked out of the room for a minute to put the laundry basket away, and when she returned she was far more demure. "Are you ashamed of me, Kit?" she asked, in a voice that was so quiet it was barely audible.

Kit spun around in surprise. "No," he returned, in a quiet voice to match hers. "I'm not ashamed of you; why would you think...?"

"You talk like I embarrass you, that you feel foolish to have a wife that goes to work."

He sat back and sighed gently. "It's myself that I feel embarrassed of, Isabella, not you."

She frowned, then walked over to his chair, balancing on the left arm. "Why, Kit? You've nothing to feel embarrassed of."

"It's my dang arm," he said, in a voice that was grave and far-away sounding.

Isabella tensed a little. It was rare for Kit to bring up his injury, and though she dearly wished to discuss the subject, to let Kit know that it didn't make him any less of a man to her, any less whole, she knew she had to tread carefully. *"We've already fought enough tonight,"* she thought to herself. *"I don't wish for this conversation to become any worse than it already has. It's time to keep the peace now."*

So she waited for him to keep speaking, not wishing to prod him. Kit was the sort of man who needed space to come round to things in

his own time. If you rushed him, or tried to push him, he only closed up, became more set in his ways. More stubborn. Isabella knew this by now, so she sat, balanced on the armrest, hoping he would fill the silence if she let him.

"That's what I'm embarrassed about, Isabella. Embarrassed that I'm not a whole person any more, that people will see you out working and assume I can't take care of you."

"But you work plenty hard. Ten, twelve hours a day you are out there in the woods, providing for me and the town. Everybody knows that, Kit." She reached her hand out and stroked his arm.

"Do they? They likely assume that Jedediah does all the hard labor, and I only supervise him," Kit said, swallowing. "Which, to be fair to them, is how it is."

"It is not," Isabella admonished. "I've seen how hard you work Kit, twice as hard as a man with both arms. What you've got to realize is that me having my own job doesn't take away from that. We each work hard, in different ways, and if other people can't see that, or they want to make up stories to fill their time with, let them. We are too busy to take any notice."

"I know I shouldn't pay any mind to what other people think," Kit agreed. "No man's words should impact me this way. I should only listen to God's words."

"And mine," Isabella teased, giving her husband a friendly nudge.

Kit chuckled, "Of course. You are the boss around here, after all."

"Kit..." Isabella said, worried that he wasn't teasing.

"Oh, I don't mean it. I know that you're only looking for me when you fuss. You only want me to be healthy."

"I only want the best for you," she reassured him. "If I come across like I'm being bossy, I am sorry. I know I can speak in such a straight manner that it takes some getting used to."

"You always speak with good intentions," Kit said, wrapping his arm around her. "Which is more than I can say for myself. I've got a temper, Isabella, I know that..."

"It's nothing I can't handle."

"You're a strong woman, Isabella. But that doesn't mean that you should have to put up with me coming home in such a rotten mood as I was tonight." He sighed. "You were right, you know, I was letting Jedediah get inside my head."

"I knew it," Isabella thought, but she knew better than to say it and to gloat. She did wish that Kit would keep his distance from the younger man though, or at least pay less notice to his words. If there was anyone in the town more backwards, or more superstitious than Kit, then it was Jedediah, and Isabella didn't like his influence on her husband. She understood the bond they shared as soldiers, but as far as she was concerned, back in White Elk they ought to think as individuals.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Kit said. "I want you to know that I'm not embarrassed of you, Isabella. I'm proud. Proud to call you my wife."

"And proud that I'm a doctor?" she asked, wondering if that was pushing her luck too far, but unable to restrain herself.

"Very proud," he replied quickly, reaching over to lay a peck on her cheek.

But Isabella wasn't so sure.

* * *

A LATE NIGHT EMERGENCY

* * *

White Elk, 1871, Two Weeks Later

"What on Earth is that?" Isabella asked, jolted awake by a commotion going on outside the front door of the house. She fumbled around for her slippers, her eyes foggy from sleep, feeling as though she was still half in a dream.

"It sounds like some creature or other outside the front door," Kit said, rising as well. "I think I ought to get the shot gun."

"Nonsense," Isabella said. "What do you think it is, for crying out loud? A bear? You do have a wild imagination." But she sat still for a second, her heart beating a little faster, as she waited for the sound again, praying that it wouldn't be a roaring sound, or the noise of claws grappling against the front door.

There was a loud knocking sound, and a desperate voice calling out. "Isabella! I need you! Please, come quick!"

"Mollie," Isabella gasped, leaping out of the bed, running towards the front entrance. She pulled the latch open and pulled the door back, to find Molly shivering there in nothing but a white night gown.

"Why, child, you're going to freeze to death out there!" Isabella reached an arm around Mollie and pulled her inside. "Quickly, come in." She raised her voice to call out to Kit. "Kit, hurry up and get some firewood on the fire!"

Kit stumbled into the door, rubbing his eyes. When he saw Mollie,

and caught the state of her, he nodded and went outside to grab the wood.

"There there," Isabella said, rubbing Mollie's shoulders. "It's going to be warm in here soon. Just sit and wait tight." She looked down and saw that Mollie was shaking, and Isabella could tell it was from more than just the cold. She knelt down. "Mollie, what's wrong? Why aren't you at home? Where's Thomas?"

Kit came back in, carrying as much fire wood as he could manage in the basket, and began stoking the fire.

"I don't know," Mollie said, shaking, tears running down her cheeks. "He never came home last night."

Isabella and Kit glanced at each other, exchanging a concerned look.

"Isabella, something is wrong, I've still got that awful pain from the other day."

Isabella straightened her face up before she moved around in front of Mollie, not wanting to frighten the girl. "Where is the pain, Mollie?"

"In my stomach. Oh, Isabella, do you think it's the baby? I'm worried I'm already going into labor...it's too soon..." Mollie began to cry and Isabella reached out a hand to soothe her.

"Come on, you must remain calm. Panicking will only make things worse for you and the baby. Try to calm your breathing okay - in and out, in and out."

Mollie looked frightened, but she tried to take a few deep breaths.

"Now," Isabella said. "Can you show me exactly where the pain is coming from?"

"It's here," Mollie said, placing a hand at the top of her abdomen, in the middle of her chest.

Isabella smiled at her. "Now, that's not where the baby is, is it?"

Mollie thought for a second. "No, I suppose not. The baby is lower down."

"I think the baby is causing some discomfort, but he or she isn't in any danger. I think you're suffering from indigestion."

"Indigestion?" Mollie asked.

Isabella nodded. "A glass of warm milk ought to settle it down." She glanced at Kit who nodded, and headed into the kitchen to prepare the drink. "Now, let's move you over to the fire, while Kit makes the milk for you. You're still shaking."

"I was so frightened...I thought something was wrong..."

"It's okay," Isabella comforted her, helping her to a seat in front of the fire. "It's normal to be worried at this stage in a pregnancy."

"I was frightened that I might go into labor, and with Thomas not there, I panicked."

"I understand." Isabella reached out and patted her hand. "Do you have any idea where Thomas might be?"

Mollie shook her head, turning it as Kit brought in the glass of milk and placed it in Mollie's hands.

"Here you go dear. This ought to make you feel better. At least, according to the good doctor here, it will. She's the expert."

Mollie smiled. "Thank you." Then she turned back to Isabella. "You really are so good to me, Isabella. I don't know what I would do without you."

"Come now, you should get some sleep. You must stay the night here, rest up, and in the morning we will look for Thomas. Meanwhile, let's all pray that he returns home safely."

* * *

Isabella and Kit were up bright and early the next morning, as they watched Mollie sleeping peacefully on the small mattress by the fire.

"You sure knew what was ailing her last night," Kit said with admiration. "I thought you were real good, calming her like that. For a moment there, I was scared she was gonna go into labor right here, and have the baby on our floor!"

Isabella laughed. "No, it's still too early for that. Indigestion is common during pregnancy; it wasn't too difficult to diagnose."

"There you go, being all humble again."

Isabella took a sip of her tea. "You know, you did a good job last night as well, helping out."

He waved his hand. "Ah, I didn't do anything."

"Yes you did. You remained calm, and helpful, and made her feel comfortable and at ease. Those things are important when a patient is under stress. Now look at her sleeping so peacefully. She'll wake up sound and rested."

Kit raised an eyebrow. "At least until she realises that husband of hers is still missing."

Isabella sighed. "Yes, I am worried about that as well. Where on Earth do you think he might have got to, Kit? Come on now, you know him better than anyone; you must have some clue?"

Kit shrugged. "Probably went out hunting and got lost. The kid is an arrogant little one, I can tell you that."

Isabella looked horrified. "In the cold of last night? Oh Kit, if he got lost he could be half freezing to death by now." She raced over to the wardrobe and got Kit's jacket for him. "You need to go out and look for him at once. And don't you come back until you find him."

* * *

Kit came bustling back in through the door three hours later, with a freezing Thomas in tow. Mollie leapt up and ran to her husband, wrapping her arms around him, as Kit shook his head at Isabella. "I tell you what, a man with brains as dense as that has no right trying to take over this town," Kit grumbled, pulling his jacket off. "Who gets lost in the place they grew up in? No sense of direction, that kid. No common sense either, if you ask me."

"Kit, you shouldn't speak about him like that. You served together; you've been through so much together."

"That's what gives me the right," Kit commented. "Anyone who didn't know the kid spoke like that about him, I'd clip the fella over the ears. But I've earned the right. I was in charge of him while we were fighting, you know that? He used to have to obey my every command. Now he has the attitude like he runs the place. No respect for his elders."

"You're not that much older than him," Isabella pointed out, folding a sheet.

"Ten years. That's old enough."

Isabella put the sheet down and stood up on her tiptoes to give her husband a kiss on the cheek. "You're still looking after him, even after all this time, even back in civilian life. You had to rescue him this morning! He'll be properly humbled, don't you worry about that! You did good by him, Kit, and he will be grateful."

* * *

"Hello there Susan," Isabella beamed. "Why, I've hardly seen you at all recently."

Susan nodded, walking behind Isabella as they entered the practise. "I've been busy. Trekking around, taking my journal up into the mountains so I could record details, and writing them down for posterity. I'm trying to record a journal of this place, to capture it before it gets totally taken over by civilization."

Isabella looked around in shock. "You've been up in the mountains?"

Susan nodded. "The woods really aren't that scary once you get up there."

"Well, you're a braver woman than I am," Isabella stated, sitting down behind her desk.

Susan took a seat across from her. "I thought you didn't believe any of that stuff," she said teasingly.

"I don't, Susan. I'm a good, god-fearing woman, and I don't believe there's monsters in the woods. But that doesn't mean I'd go trekking through them all on my own."

Susan shrugged. "I don't mind."

"What does Jedediah make of it all, having you go off for long walks in the wilderness all on your own?"

Susan laughed. "I don't take that much mind. If I want to do something, I'll do it."

Isabella smiled. "I admire your spirit, Susan. So independent."

"Well you're the same," Susan said. "You've got a mind of your own. You've got a job, and a profession all of your own. That's something to be admired."

Isabella rested her elbows on her desk, with her palms crossed and her head balanced against her hands for a moment, pondering this statement. "Yes, I suppose so."

"You suppose."

"Sometimes I wonder if I am actually needed out here. And if having this practise is such a good thing..."

"Kit?" Susan asked. "Is he still giving you a hard time about it?"

"He's settled down," Isabella started. "And he's being more supportive. But I still can't help but feel he'd rather I was at home. He still seems to think medicine is unnecessary, that practising it is some kind of conceit on my behalf. He thinks the town worked just fine before I got here."

Susan reached a hand out for Isabella's. "Don't feel like that. What you do is absolutely necessary, and you can't let Kit make you feel otherwise."

Isabella nodded. "So what have you come in to see me about today?"

Susan pulled her hand back and rolled down the sleeve of her other arm. She reached out and showed it to Isabella, revealing a swollen, red wrist.

"Oh dear," Isabella said, reaching a hand out to examine the swollen joint. "What on earth happened?"

"Took a tumble on one of my walks," Susan said. "I reached my arms out to break my fall, and ended up with a rather nasty sprain I'm afraid."

Isabella turned the wrist over in her hands, asking Susan to describe how the pain was, and whether she could move her fingers.

"A little," Susan said, wiggling them weakly, wincing as she did so.

"Now, it's a rather bad sprain, but not a break," Isabella said, reaching in her cupboard for a bandage and a splint. "You are a brave woman, Susan!" she had to admit with a little laugh. "Sitting and talking to me all this time, without any sign of pain showing on your face!"

Susan laughed as well as Isabella began to wrap the wrist. "We're both brave women, Isabella - we have to be to survive out here!"

* * *

DISASTER STRIKES

* * *

White Elk, 1871, One Week Later

"I've told you before not to drink that," Isabella scolded, taking the mug from Kit's hands. It was a particularly cold frosty day, and Isabella wasn't looking forward to leaving the warm house to work in a cold office. She was already running late for work, and Kit was making her even later.

"This is water from the lake, Isabella, it's as pure as they come."

Isabella shook her head. "All water directly from the lake needs to be boiled before humans can drink it. I've told you this before, Kit...I thought you knew better than this by now."

"Ah, it's all pollycock," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "I've been drinking it since I was a boy, and it never did me no harm!"

"It's not fit for small children or pregnant women, Kit," Isabella said, trying to keep her voice calm, but she was rapidly losing patience. "Now, let me boil and cool this water before I send it down to Mollie."

Kit was huffing and puffing as he slammed the pot down on the stove, sending water spilling over the edge, onto the open flame.

"What's the matter now, Kit?" Isabella asked. "I can see you've gone and got yourself in a right mood now. Boiling water can't be that difficult, can it?"

"What are you trying to say?" Kit snapped, turning his head round over his shoulder. "Do you mean with just one arm?"

"No, of course not. That's not what I mean. Not physically difficult. I mean why do you have to make it so emotionally difficult, making a big fuss of simply boiling some water?"

"It's because you speak to me as though I'm a child again, like I don't know anything about sterilizing water."

"Well it seems like you don't know anything..."

"I had to take care of all my men while I was out in the battlefield," he snarled, cutting her off. "I know about clean drinking water. About how dirty water can cause disease, and great distress in men when they drink it." He looked down for a moment, as though he was recalling some terrible memory, before he turned back to the stove.

"Well then why do you argue with me about it? You know that little boy who came to see me down at the practice was sick from drinking bad water. Yet you're still against sterilization."

"Because I never got sick from drinking outta that lake, that's why. All this fussing is doing no good. You're too over cautious, Isabella, doing things that don't matter, that don't make no difference."

"Yes, I suppose I am just a total waste of space in this town, aren't I?" Isabella said, flinging her tea towel down before she stomped out of the room. "Thanks for making me feel so wanted and needed, Kit!"

"Isabella!" he tried to call, but she was already gone, and he

wouldn't see her again till nightfall.

* * *

"Come in and sit down," Kit said, ushering Isabella in out of the cold. "I wish you wouldn't stay out so late."

"I had a lot of patients to see," she said wearily. "It seems like there's an illness going around, half the town seems to be struck down with it."

"Well you won't do no good getting so exhausted that you can't function," Kit said, placing his hand on her back as he guided her to the table. "Are you hungry, my love?"

"Starving," she said. It had been hours since she'd eaten. In fact, she couldn't even remember the last time she'd had a bite of food, it had been such a busy day.

Kit was quiet for a few minutes while he prepared some bread for their supper. "I'm awful sorry about that fight we had this morning, Isabella. I didn't mean any of those words I said."

"About how I'm useless, and a busy-body who makes life harder for everyone?" she asked, glancing up.

"I never said those words." He placed a plate piled high with bread and butter in front of her.

"I know, I know. Perhaps I over-reacted. I just don't like to feel as though I'm not needed here. When you say things like you did, I wonder what use I am here. Why I ever came here."

"Hey," Kit said, sitting down beside her and grasping her hand in his. "Don't speak like that. You do a great service in this town, and you're more than needed." His eyes turned sad. "Besides, I don't like to think that the only reason you came here was to practice medicine." He looked almost hurt. "You don't regret coming here, do you? Marrying me?"

Isabella shook her head. "No, of course not," she said, gazing into her husband's deep brown eyes. "I could never regret that. You try my patience at times Kit, and Lord knows it's not always easy, but I've never been happier before in my life, than being here with you."

"You really mean that?"

"I really do."

* * *

"I'm exhausted," Isabella said, slumping down at the dining table and resting her head against her arms. "Oh," she groaned, "I feel as though I could fall asleep right here."

"I'll get you some tea," Kit offered.

"No, I'm too hot. Water is fine."

Kit nodded and headed to the kitchen. In front of him on the stove sat a pot of water, which he walked towards and stuck a finger in, to check the temperature.

Cold.

Kit had to think for a moment. *"Is this the water I boiled this*

morning, cooled down? Or is it fresh water from the lake that hasn't been sterilized yet?"

He thought good and hard for a good few minutes, not wanting to make a mistake. *"I think drinking the fresh water from the lake can't do no harm, but Isabella believes otherwise. And I don't want to upset her again, nor make her ill."* He peered at the water. *"It must be boiled. I wouldn't have put a fresh batch on, and then just forgotten about it."*

But he had been getting awful forgetful recently, so he poured the water into the mug with some trepidation.

"Ah, it'll be fine," he said to himself. "After all, what's the worst that can happen?"

* * *

"Arggh," Isabella groaned, doubled over, clutching her stomach. Kit came running into the room, anguished after hearing his wife groaning in such distress.

"Whatever's wrong, my love?" he asked, seeing Isabella on her knees next to the basin, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

Kit's stomach dropped. A sharp pang shot through his chest as he thought, *"Oh no, the water. It must not have been boiled after all."*

Isabella groaned again. Kit leapt forward and helped her up, lifting her up as well as he could with his good arm, carrying her to the bed. "You need to lie down," he said, his heart beating as the guilt flowed through him.

"How could I have been so thoughtless, so reckless? Oh, I should have

listened to Isabella all this time. She knew what she was talking about."

He laid her down on the bed, then looked towards the ceiling as he said a prayer. *"God please let her be alright and I'll never disobey a word she says ever again. And I'll never be so reckless with health, or with the water. Oh, I'm sorry God, please just take care of her. Make me sick if you must, but please take this illness from Isabella."*

Finishing his prayer, he looked down to see Isabella shaking on top of the bed, so he raced to fetch more blankets, before wrapping them around her. *"The water must have given her an awful fever,"* he thought, his guilt growing worse and worse. *"Oh, I should go and drink that water myself; I deserve to endure the punishment."*

But he realized doing so would be foolish, and would only make matters worse. He needed to be strong and well, for now it was Isabella who needed caring for, and Kit had to look after her, nurse her back to health.

"She's relying on me now," he thought, as he looked around desperately for anything that might help him. A cloth, a bucket, Isabella's doctor's bag...He wasn't used to playing doctor, and now he desperately wished he'd listened to Isabella's lectures about medicine. *"What do I do for her?"* he thought, at the same time also repeating the thought, *"this is all my fault, this is all my fault."*

* * *

"Isabella? Kit?" a voice called from outside the house. Kit recognized that it belonged to Susan, but he had no intention of leaving Isabella's side to greet a house guest. He turned back to Isabella and continued to dab her forehead with a wash cloth,

ignoring the calls.

But Susan persisted, and eventually Kit got fed up and stamped towards the door just so he could tell her to be quiet. Isabella needed peace right now, and Susan calling out wasn't helping the situation any.

"Susan, what is it?" he demanded. "You're making an awful racket out here, and..."

"I was just coming to see how Isabella is," Susan said. "She wasn't feeling too well today at work and I was a bit worried about it."

Kit froze for a second. "She was sick at work today?"

"Yes, well, she seemed a bit off, anyway. Acted like it was nothing, but she's always on top of her game, so I knew something was wrong. Wasn't she feeling sick when she came home?"

Kit pondered for a moment, thinking back to how Isabella had been when she'd arrived home from work. "Come to think of it, yes. She was. She was completely exhausted, and she complained of being hot even though it was freezing cold outside. I thought she was just tired from a long day, but maybe it was more than that."

"There's an illness going around, I'm afraid," Susan commented. "With all the patients Isabella sees every day, it's no wonder she got ill. Was probably only a matter of time." She stopped speaking when she saw the look of relief...almost, happiness on 'it's fac". "Kit, why do you look so pleased that Isabella is sick?"

"Oh," he said, shaking his head. "Oh, I'm definitely not pleased

that she is ill. Far, far from it. I'm just pleased that I am not the one to blame. Hang on, can you wait here for one moment?"

"Er, sure."

Kit closed the door halfway and went back into the kitchen, where he saw Isabella's cup from earlier still sitting on the dining table. He raced over and looked at the contents. It was still full. Hadn't even been touched. He heaved a huge sigh of relief. Even though he was still confident that the water had been boiled, he now knew with certainty that he had not made her sick. She had simply caught the illness from one of her patients.

He walked back to the door. "She is rather ill, I'm afraid," he said.

"Oh no," Susan replied. "Can I help in some way?"

Kit shook his head. "I'm grateful for the offer, but I really should get back to her."

Susan frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Are you sure? I thought you didn't know much about medicine, Kit."

"I know how to take care of my wife when she is sick," he said, then added, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I know you're just worried about Isabella."

"I can see you are too, Kit," Susan replied. "I just want to know that she's in good hands."

"She is," Kit reassured her. "I won't let any harm come to her."

"Alright," Susan said, turning to leave. "Please come and get me if

you need anything. Jedediah and I will help you in any way we can."

"I certainly don't need Jedediah thinking I can't take care of my wife in an emergency." Still, as he waved Susan off, he caught himself. He wouldn't let his pride get in the way of Isabella's health. He decided that if Isabella took a turn for the worse in the night then he would send for help, but until then, he was going to step up, and take care of his wife the way a husband ought to.

* * *

THE SEASONS CHANGE

* * *

White Elk, 1871.

As the night grew colder, Isabella only appeared to grow hotter, and Kit was busy supplying fresh cool wash cloths for her forehead. He'd remembered Isabella telling him once that this was how to treat a fever, and he was grateful that at least one thing seemed to have stuck in his head.

He was sitting on a seat beside her, just about to nod off to sleep when she made a pained noise that jolted him back awake.

"Isabella," he whispered. "Are you okay?"

She groaned, moving her head so that the wet towel fell off, onto the pillow. He raced over and replaced it on her forehead. Even from that brief touch he could tell she was still running an awful fever.

He sat down beside her and hung his head in his hands. "If only there was someone I could call for you! But you're the town's only doctor! What does the doctor do when she gets sick? Who is there to turn to?"

Isabella groaned again and turned her face to look at him. "You're going to have to take care of me, Kit. You're going to have to be my doctor." Her voice was croaky and strained.

"Stop speaking, then," Kit said, brushing his hand against her cheek. "That's the first thing. You need to stay quiet and still."

She shook her head slightly. "I need to tell you what to do...I need..." she tried to speak, but the words just wouldn't come out. Her throat was burning, and so swollen that it was almost sealed tight.

"You don't need to tell me what to do. I'll figure it out," Kit said gently. "I'm your husband, you're my wife and I can figure out how to take care of you when you're sick. This is what I'm here for."

She smiled weakly before she closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

There was a knocking on the door and Kit raced to see who it was. "Oh, hello Susan," he said politely, holding the door back for her.

"I just came to check on how Isabella was doing," Susan said, her face contorted with concern. "I'm so worried about her."

Kit swallowed, trying not to let the worry show on his own face. "She's doing a bit better," he said softly.

"Is she? You don't sound so sure."

Kit shook his head. "To be honest, I don't know what else to do for her. I keep changing her washcloth, hoping the fever is going to come down, but it doesn't seem to be doing no good."

"Can I take a look at her?"

Kit nodded, and Susan began to walk towards the bedroom. "She's sleeping," Kit explained. "Has been for two days now."

"We need to get her to drink some fluids," Susan said, and Kit nodded. "Do you have clean drinking water?"

Kit nodded with more vigour. "Oh yes, got plenty of that. Made sure of that, don't worry."

"Good," Susan replied. "Now you go get the water and I'll wake her gently."

After a few minutes Kit came in with the water, and, with Susan's help, they managed to get her to sip a few mouthfuls. But her lips still looked dry, and there was a hint of blueness surrounding them.

"Thanks for helping out," Kit said. "I wouldn't be much use trying to hold her mouth open, while pouring in the water. Not in my condition."

Susan glanced over at his missing limb and smiled kindly. "Don't worry, you're doing a great job. You did the right thing keeping the washcloth clean and cool. That would have been a great help."

He sighed. "Doesn't feel like I'm doing any good. I feel useless. I hate feeling like this."

He glanced over at his darling Isabella, who was lying there more peacefully now she'd had a drink of water. "I suppose this is how Isabella must feel at times," he said gently. "Wondering if she is even making a difference, feeling helpless. Wondering if there is any point trying to help people."

Susan chuckled a little. "She does an amazing job, though."

Kit nodded. "She does."

"And you're doing a great job, Kit. Isabella will be fine. We just need to keep her clean and warm, keep giving her plenty of fluids, and she'll be recovered in no time. Don't worry."

* * *

"Woah there, you shouldn't be up and about," Kit said, dropping his armful of firewood onto the floor.

"I feel fine," Isabella said, stretching her arms up. "As though I've slept for a hundred years."

"You practically did," Kit said, admiring the fresh, bright look in her eyes. "You really do look much better. Healthy, even."

Isabella grinned and walked towards her husband. "I think I had a good doctor looking after me."

"Aw, shucks," he said, looking at the ground. "I had help from Susan. She seemed to know what to do, more than I did."

"You did wonderfully," Isabella said softly. "It was you who stayed up with me all night when my fever was bad, giving me water, changing my washcloth. You know, Kit, you wouldn't make such a bad doctor yourself."

He let out a jolly laugh, throwing his head back. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Yeah, that might be pushing it a little," Isabella replied, laughing. She walked over and put her arms around her husband, pulling him in for a tight embrace. "Thank you Kit. You took care of me when I needed it the most."

The smell of pine tree was heavy in the air as Isabella locked her arm though Kit's as they took a walk to the edge of the woods. Kit sighed. "Do you think he's going to be alright without me?"

Isabella glanced over at Jedediah and took in the sight of him over by the trees, hunched over, chopping wood like a mad man. She laughed. "I would say he's going to be just fine."

"I still don't feel right, leaving him like this." Kit had mixed feelings right then, and needed Isabella to reassure him that he was doing the right thing.

Isabella squeezed his arm tight. "I know it's difficult for you, but you're better suited to a different lifestyle now Kit. I know you can be brave enough to come to accept that."

"Out of the two of us, I think you're the brave one, Isabella."

They stood in silence for a few minutes, each pleased to just feel the company of the other one beside them. A warm breeze pushed past them, brushing Isabella's cheek, and she realized that for the first time since she'd arrived in White Elk, there was no chill in the air. "Spring must be just around the corner," she commented.

"Don't get too used to this warm spell," Kit chuckled. "It stays pretty cool down here by the edge of the woods, even in the summer months."

"Well, let's enjoy it while it lasts."

They walked home together, Isabella soaking up the sunlight on her face. But as she glanced besides her, she was surprised to find that Kit didn't look to be enjoying it quite so much.

"What's wrong?" she asked gently.

"I was just thinking about something," he murmured.

"What were you thinking?" she asked, linking her arm back through his. "Please tell me."

He walked for a few meters, before he began to speak. "I never told you this, but during the war, when I got..." he stopped and swallowed, then took a deep breath. "When I got my injury. Had my arm amputated..."

"Yes?" Isabella said, her voice kind and warm, as she gazed up at her husband. "You can talk to me about it Kit. What happened?"

"It's just...the doctors. Who did the procedure. The ones who took the arm off. They didn't do a real nice job of it, Isabella. It wasn't a good experience." He stopped talking again for a moment, and Isabella though she saw the glint of a tear in his eyes. "I wouldn't wish for anyone in the world - not even my worse enemy - to go through that."

Isabella squeezed his arm as she snuggled into him. "Oh, Kit. I never wanted to push, but I thought it might be something like that. I can't imagine the pain you must have gone through." She looked up at him. "Makes sense, why you're so wary of doctors," she said, understanding now.

"I just wish those doctors had been like you," he commented.

She squeezed his arm again and they walked quietly for a few minutes, each grateful to have the other one next to them. "I'm glad to hear you say that," Isabella said finally. "Sometimes I wonder if I even do any good, if I am any use to anyone."

"I struggle with those feelings as well," Kit admitted. "Feeling useless. Ever since we got back from battle, I wonder if there's anyone who still needs me around. Thomas and Jedediah don't need me anymore."

"Hey," she said. "Sure they do. Especially Thomas. He may act proud and brave, but he's just a kid still. With his father gone, he needs you now. More than he did before, even on the battlefield."

Kit sighed. "I'll do what I can for the boy, try to help him find his way a little. Though he is convinced he runs this town, and doesn't need me."

"He knows deep down that he does. Just don't give up on him."

"I won't," Kit reassured her, leaning over to plant a kiss on her forehead. He smiled a little. "You always tell me exactly what I need to hear, Isabella, even if I don't want to hear it."

"Especially when you don't want to hear it. That's when you need it the most."

"That's true," he chuckled. "Sorry I've been so dang stubborn all this time, Isabella."

"It's okay," she said, wrapping her arm around him. "You come 'round to things in your own time. And even when you're being

pigheaded, you're still kind to me, and you still take care of me. You're a good husband, Kit, and I couldn't wish for anyone better. I'm so glad I came here to White Elk."

"I'm glad of it too," Kit said. "We all are."

* * *

THE END

EPILOGUE

* * *

White Elk, 1871 Six Months Later.

Spring came and went in White Elk, and soon it was summer. Kit had been right with his earlier warning - even in the summer months, White Elk retained a chill in the air. Especially down beside the lake, where the wind blew over the icy surface, sending shivers over the skin of anyone who stood near it.

"Funny, isn't it," Isabella commented to Susan one morning. "All those rumors we heard about this place, before we arrived. I always thought they were silly, but standing here, besides this lake with a temperature that never rises, you have to wonder, don't you?"

Susan laughed. "Never thought I'd hear you speak like that, Isabella. You're starting to sound like Kit and Jedediah."

"I wouldn't go that far." Isabella looked over the water. "I guess some things just can't be explained. There is a strangeness to this place, even I have to admit it. But maybe it's not our place to try and explain it."

"At least people are no longer getting sick from the water," Susan pointed out. "Thanks to you."

Isabella nodded, but she knew she wasn't entirely to thank. Now that Thomas had been officially elected head of the town, he was putting all sort of policies and new ideas into place, and there were now several rainwater tanks around town that collected and purified water for the residents to drink. "Thomas did his part as well."

"Only on your suggestion, and with your guidance," Susan pointed out. "I swear to it, Isabella, there's no one in this world who is harder to give a compliment to. Can you just accept that we need you here in White Elk, and that you've done good here?"

Isabella reached over and gave her friend a squeeze and a hug. "I can accept it just this once then. But I know that my work here will never be done."

* * *

"Wow," Isabella said, as she stepped inside her newly refurbished practise. She spun around and took in the smell of fresh paint, admiring the pale blue shade that Kit had painted the walls with and the new, comfortable furniture for the patients.

"Worth shutting down for a few days for, then?" Kit asked. "You needed the rest anyway, and time to spend with your new god child."

"More than worth it," Isabella said, reaching over to pick up an apple from the basket near the door. "And apples, as well? Kit, you really have surprised me."

"Well, I know you think those things are healthy."

"They are," she said, taking a big bite of the juicy fruit. "Thank you for listening to me."

He put his paintbrush down and walked over to her, taking the apple out of her hand and placing it on the table. "Hey, I was enjoying that."

"You can enjoy it in a moment," Kit said, taking Isabella's hand in

his. "Isabella, I have one more big surprise for you."

"What is it?"

He led her into the adjoining room, Isabella's office, which had previously been almost bare, except for a bed for patients, and a small desk for Isabella. "What's this?" she asked, looking at the new pine bookshelf that stood seven foot tall against the wall. She walked towards and saw that it was full of books, journals, and writings about medicine and science, by writers and physicians that Isabella admired.

"Kit, where did you find all these?" she gasped, flicking through one of the books.

"Susan helped me. She knows all about these things."

"I'll be able to learn so much," she said, still flicking through the pages. "Improve my work, learn new techniques." Then she looked up. "But these are expensive books, Kit. Along with all these renovations... this must mean that you are truly happy for me to continue my work here, as a doctor. Do you mean it, Kit?"

"I support you, Isabella, and I want you to become as skilled as you can, become as great as you are capable of being. If I ever held you back, or made you feel unsupported, I'm sorry. I'm trying to make it up to you now."

She placed the book on the shelf and walked back towards her husband. "You may have given me some grief at times, Kit, but I've never felt like you wanted to hold me back. I know that it has taken a lot for you to over come your own prejudices and superstitions. For a man who is very set in his ways, Kit, you've certainly shown yourself

to have an open mind." She wrapped her arms around her husband and squeezed him tight.

"There's one last thing," Kit said, glancing at the bookshelf behind Isabella. "I hope you'll let me use this office a bit myself, so I can have a read of some of those books. There's a lot I need to learn myself." He brushed the hair on top of her head. "I never want to be the cause of you getting sick, ever again, for one thing."

She pulled back a little, looking up at him in surprise. "Hey, that wasn't your fault, remember?"

"But it could have been," he pointed out. "And when you were sick I barely knew what to do. Now I've got you, I have a family to take care of, and we've got a god child now as well," he said, thinking about Mollie and Thomas's newborn baby. "They've trusted us to guide the child, to take care of him if anything happens to them. I want to learn as much as I can, so that all the people I love can be safe. I do love every last one of you, Isabella. Especially you, my dear."

"Me too," she whispered.

He hugged Isabella, and she squeezed him back, so grateful to hear those words, to know that she was supported and loved. Needed. By Mollie, and Thomas, and the baby, and Susan. By the people of White Elk. And by her husband, this strange, brave man who was always surprising her.

Kit pulled his arm back and brushed Isabella on the cheek. "Now, it's time for you to get back to work, Doctor."

THREE BRIDES FOR THREE WAR COMRADES

2

**ASHAMED, BEATEN & SAVED BY HER BURNED
HERO**

SUSAN

* * *

1871

"You look so beautiful, Susan," Annabelle said, tying Susan's bonnet around her head. "I'm awful jealous."

Susan smiled wanly, thinking, *"There's not much to be jealous of."* She stopped and gazed at her reflection in the mirror, noticing her eyes looked far older than her 24 years. *"If Annabelle knew the truth about me, what skeletons I've buried, she wouldn't be so envious."*

Yet the first impression Susan gave to other women was one of a woman so beautiful, so well presented and fine, they often couldn't help but find themselves jealous. Other women envied her long, pale blonde hair, so smooth and easy to style, and her pale, flawless skin and bright sky-blue eyes, doll-like, with dark thick lashes that framed them. She was slim with an enviable figure and always dressed in the latest, most fashionable styles. Add that to the fact that Susan was bright, with a brain to match her outward beauty, and you had all the makings of a woman that drove other women into fits of envy.

But, as is often the case in life, things were not exactly as they seemed. There lay a lot beneath the surface, scars that were too deep to be seen, and a past that was far from enviable. In fact, Susan's past was not the sort that a single women alive in 1871 would envy. Most would likely cast themselves out in shame, if they'd been through what she had.

Yet Susan tried to hold her head high. Tried to keep going through life. But it was tough. Once people found out about her the

longing looks and the approving stares disappeared, replaced by looks of disapproval. Pity. Rejection.

"Oh, I'm not so special," Susan said, stepping out from under the bonnet and ducking her head, shaking it to show that it wasn't for her. "Too frilly," she commented, pointing towards a bonnet that was far more understated.

Annabelle frowned. "Are you sure you want to try that one? It's new, just got it in last week. It's...very modern, I'm afraid. Can't get any of the women interested in it. I believe I will be returning the style back to the supplier."

"I like it," Susan said. "And if no one else is wearing that style, even better." She grinned and nodded towards the hat again, and Annabelle skipped over to fetch the pale green bonnet before placing it gently on Susan's head.

"There," Susan said, catching a glimpse of herself in the looking glass. She admired the way the green of the bonnet made her blue eyes stand out even more. "That's the one."

She made her way downtown, new bonnet bobbing on the top of her head, catching approving glances from admirers as she walked. She nodded, bowing her head coyly, as the men of the town dipped their hats at her and offered her warm greetings.

But she was simply going through the motions, being polite, accepting the praises and stares as a matter of course. She was no stranger to male attention, but she knew that very few of these men - perhaps none at all - would want to marry her if they found out about her past. At just 24 years of age, Susan felt like an old maid, a spinster

before her time. On the outside she may have looked young and gorgeous, but on the inside she felt ugly and unwanted.

Finally reaching her destination, she glanced up at the shop front. The Westwood Times. The one place she felt at home. She pushed the door open with a mighty shove and stepped inside.

"Good morning, Susan. Lovely hat," Jonathan Peacock, the editor of the paper, commented.

Susan took her gloves off and held them gingerly in one hand, so that they were dangling delicately in the air. "Thank you. Just new today." She'd splurged a little on the hat, so she was hoping for good news from Jonathan. News that they would be publishing one of her stories that week, and that she would be able to come away with a purse full of coins.

Susan held his gaze for a few moments, trying to read the look on his face. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach as his gaze dropped away, and he turned his body away from hers, back towards the printing press. "It's not good news, is it, Jonathan?" She bowed her head a little and tried to keep her face looking straight and reserved. No point in showing emotion to the man; that would hardly get him to change her mind. If he didn't want to publish her work, that was just the way it was. "Can I ask what the problem was, with the piece?" She clenched her jaw a little.

Jonathan continued to fuss a little with the press, before sighing and turning back to face her. "It's just that money is awful tight right now, and we can only publish the best..."

"I would appreciate the truth, please, Jonathan." Susan peered at

him from under her bonnet, sending him a look that said, *I can handle it*.

Jonathan cleared his throat, clearly reluctant to have to be so blunt with the young women. "To be completely frank with you Susan, it was a little...frivolous."

"Frivolous?" Susan repeated, shocked to hear him come out with that assessment of her work. Yes, her story had been a tale about a young girl attending a party, but Susan thought it had contained deep emotion and characterisation. Jonathan nodded, adding that the work was 'frothy' and lacked meaning, as Susan composed herself. "So what you're saying, when you say this word 'frivolous', or you say that it is frothy, what you mean is, it's about female things. Which can't possibly be as serious, or have as much meaning as subjects concerning men."

"Now hang on Susan, I'm not saying that." Jonathan held up a hand at her, the offense showing on his face. "Less of this romantic stuff. The women's stories you come up with might be better suited for a different sort of publication. Like I said, we need stories with a bit more gravitas."

"You mean you need more male writers. Less female ones." Susan picked her purse up and began to put her gloves back on. "I shall take my stories to a paper that appreciates them then, if that is the case. Good day, Jonathan," she said, pulling the door back roughly as she went, leaving the bell overhead to ring and clatter, rather than jingle gently.

Susan stomped off down the road, already regretting her actions, as she got few yards down the street. She stopped and glanced back at

the newspaper office. *"Oh darn,"* she thought, wondering if she should go back and apologise. Now Jonathan would never print her stories, even if they were deeper, or darker, or whatever it was he was looking for. But she couldn't bring herself to turn around and walk back into that office, to grovel or apologize.

Yes, she regretted blowing up at him like that, but not the words she'd actually said. In her heart she knew she was right, that Jonathan thought her 'women's stories' were not worth as much as a man's.

Still, the rejection hurt, and as she glanced at her hat in the glass of the store window next to her, she wondered how she was going to find a way to pay back her credit at Annabelle's store. She sighed. *"Another great decision,"* she thought, picking herself up and walking again. *"One in a very long line of them."*

* * *

The next morning Susan returned to Annabelle's shop, her green bonnet in her hand. Looking up with faked confidence, she stated, "I wish to return this bonnet, please. As you were saying, it really is far too modern. Maybe it's best you return them to the suppliers after all. I tried to make it work, but I'm just not happy with it."

Annabelle frowned. She took the bonnet from Susan and turned it over. "Susan, I'm afraid I can't take this back. It's already dirty, too worn." She handed the item back to Susan and shrugged at her apologetically.

Susan swallowed, before tightening her lips. "Very well," she said, sighing. "To be honest with you, Annabelle, I am having some difficulty paying my account."

Annabelle pulled her arms across her chest. "Susan, it is already very overdue. I've been quite generous with the amount of credit I've leant you, but I am going to have to ask for payment very soon."

Susan nodded, understanding that Annabella had been patient and fair, and was only asking for what she was owed. But Susan had been relying on the money from the paper, and with similar debts all over town, she wasn't sure what she was going to do. Go back and grovel to Jonathan? Find work at another paper, or magazine?

It was at times like these that Susan returned to her darker thoughts. Her sadder thoughts. *"If I only had a husband to support me."* She hated herself for thinking like this. She admired her own independence - it was one of her best qualities, as it offset her impulsiveness and other flaws. But she couldn't help but think how much easier it would be if she had a husband to support her.

Of course, she did have one. Once. But that had been the biggest mistake of her life.

And she didn't want to repeat the mistake twice.

"I'll come up with some solution," Susan promised. "I will have your money to you shortly, Annabelle."

"You'd better, Susan. Until then, I can't allow you any further credit in my store."

Susan understood. She understood only too well. She'd already been denied credit at half the stores in town, and her luck was running out. She needed to find a way to get some money, and fast, or she wasn't going to be able to afford food, or a roof over her head for

much longer.

As she left the dress shop, she prayed for help. *"Please God, let me find a way out of this mess I have created for myself."*

But she knew she'd made a mess of many things in her life, and wondered if, just like with the store owners, her luck with God was running out. Maybe he would also stop supplying her with credit.

But God was listening, and He had a plan for young Susan. Only, she might not like it.

* * *

JEDEDIAH

* * *

White Elk *1871*

The collar grazed across the scar, only visible when Jedediah tugged on it or left his top button undone. He winced, then straightened his face before Thomas could notice.

"You okay?" Thomas asked, leading his horse behind him by the reins. Jedediah nodded, gritting his teeth.

"Can't complain."

Thomas glanced over his shoulder. "Maybe we should have left even earlier." His voice was quiet, but still managed to echo in the eerie still of the morning.

"It's already the break of dawn, man," Jedediah said, squinting ahead at the sun just breaking through the tops of the pine trees that lined the forest up ahead. "How much earlier do you want me to start?"

Thomas reached down to pick a blade of grass before placing it between his teeth, chewing lazily. "Maybe when it's still dark, next time."

Jedediah sighed. "There ain't gonna be a next time, I told ya that."

"You'll change your mind Jedediah, you always do." Thomas yanked on the reins, causing the horse to skip forward, startling the

mare so that she made a little whining noise. "Shh," Thomas said, spinning around, glancing to make sure the town was dead asleep.

Jedediah dragged his feet behind. He wouldn't have cared if the entire town woke. Might put a stop to the whole sorry business. He dug his toes into the dirt as he walked, kicking and scuffing as they passed the house of their friend Kit, making as much noise as he could.

"Hey," Thomas scolded him. "What are you trying to do there?" He kept his voice lowered down to a hiss. "Last thing we need is Kit findin' out what you been up to."

"What we've been up to," Jedediah corrected him. He glanced at the old cottage to their left, hoping the old man would rise at the sound of their arguing.

Thomas pulled Jedediah forward, out of the way. "I don't know what you're getting all brave for, but if this whole operation comes crashing down, you're the one with the most to lose."

Jedediah stood upright, keeping his eyes firm and steady on the pine trees behind Thomas, despite the fact that the younger man had his face pressed almost right against his. After a few seconds, Thomas shook his head and backed off, apologizing.

"Sorry Jed..." Thomas said, and Jedediah shoved his hands in his pockets and kept pushing forward, lighter on his heels this time, not wanting to wake Kit after all. Perhaps Thomas had a point.

"Come on Jed, I said I'm sorry." Thomas skidded, with his horse still tugging behind him, clamouring to catch up with Jedediah again.

"I'm just thinking of you, you know that."

Jedediah scowled and looked round. "You're just thinking of yourself. Needing to be in charge of everything in this town...you're just a kid, Thomas, and I don't know what right you got to boss me around, make me do your dirty work for you."

Thomas looked affronted. "Dirty work?" The reigns slid from his hands as he walked towards Jedediah. "This is an opportunity for you, to make some extra money - a lot of extra money - before your wife comes."

"Your wife comes soon as well," Jedediah scoffed, turning back around, heading towards the hills. "And I ain't seen you out here, hunting these wild beasts."

Thomas picked the reins back up as the mare watched on, docile. "I got my hands full tryna' run this town. For everyone's sake, yours and Susan's included."

Jedediah didn't turn round, so Thomas didn't see him bristle at the sound of his soon-to-be-bride's name. He'd never heard it spoken out loud before, only read it in the letters, sent by Susan and organized by the Mail Order Bride company. It felt strange to hear Thomas say it - "Susan" - as though it made it real. Made her real.

"She's going to need you to provide for her," Thomas pointed out, now finding it impossible to keep up with Jedediah and the pace the older man was now keeping. "This is the only way, Jed..."

Jedediah shoved his hands as deep into his thick coat pockets as they would go. The action made the coat tighten around his neck and

he shrugged, wincing, trying to get the material away from his neck. Deeper down, the material from his shirt was softer, against the deeper scars, the scars only visible to him. *"Susan,"* he thought, running the name over in his own mind. He didn't know too much about her, but he knew she was stunningly beautiful, and that by some grace of God she had agreed to marry him, to move out to this wild land, largely forgotten by mankind.

"Why does she want to marry a man like me?" he wondered, as his collar scraped against his neck. *"What is such a beautiful woman going to make of a man like me, when she sees me in the flesh?"*

But a roar ahead brought him wildly out of his thoughts, and, staring up at the woods ahead of him, he knew it was time - time for the hunt to begin.

* * *

THE WEDDING

* * *

1871

"Susan, they all say that town is no place for a woman." The words rang in her ears as she took the first step onto the wagon that would lead her to White Elk.

No place for a woman. Well, those words didn't scare Susan off. After the life she'd led, it would take far more to warn her off. Besides, 'no place for a woman'? That sounded like the perfect place to her. For she didn't feel like most of the women she'd known back home.

The days on the wagon were rickety and long and Susan worried about the health of one of the other women, a girl of only 19 whose name was Mollie, six months pregnant, though she looked even further along than that. Mollie clung to the side of the wagon, waving at her face with a folding fan that one of the other ladies a doctor, named Isabella, had provided her.

Susan leaned over and whispered to Isabella, "Should she really be travelling in her state?" The wagon rocked from side to side, as warm air blew in through the open carriage.

Isabella cast an eye towards the younger girl. "Ideally, perhaps not, but circumstances can make us all do desperate things."

Susan understood that only too well. She wondered what had happened to the father of Mollie's baby, but was too polite to ask. At least just yet. The women had only been travelling for a couple of days and they still had plenty of distance to go yet. She sat back and

kept quiet for a while, taking in the scenery of the journey, as the Rocky Mountains began to appear in the distance, and the air gradually began to grow cooler.

In the silence Susan began to day-dream. She could see the mountains approaching, but she could also sense them, feel them pulling her. *It almost looks like a magical fairyland*, she thought, taking in the majestic landscape of trees and lakes and caves that spread out before her.

"There will be plenty to write about, I am sure of that," she thought, taking in a deep lungful of the fresh air. *"It's like an untouched wilderness out here...who knows what I might find."* Certainly something interesting, she was sure of that. Great inspiration to fuel her stories lay here in these mountains, and the valley that lay in the center. She was sure that a little bit of time here would be able to change her character, give her greater depth, and that this would affect her stories as well. *"I'm sure I'll be able to write something more serious now. Something more respectable. Something that will actually sell."*

She reached into her satchel, pulled out her pen and diary and began to scribble something down. "What are you doing?" Mollie asked, peering at Susan as she clapped her belly with her hands. "What are you writing?" Isabella also looked over with interest, curious to know what Susan was up to.

"Ladies, I'm going to become a famous writer, now that I've moved here. And I'm about to write the greatest adventure of my life," Susan exclaimed, with a grin on her face and a sparkle in her eye. "Just you ladies wait and see."

The wagon stopped suddenly and without warning. "Alright, ladies," the driver, an older man of about 55 with weathered skin and missing teeth drawled. "This is where I've gotta drop ya."

Susan leaned forward. They were still a mile or two out of town. "But Mollie is pregnant," she said, "and our grooms will be expecting to greet us in town, not here in the middle of nowhere."

Isabella reached a hand out to place on Susan's arm, letting her know to stay calm. "There's no use in complaining," she whispered gently. "Let's just make the best of it."

Susan still found the stage coach driver's actions to be very rude, but she climbed out and helped Mollie down, and the three women started their way into town.

It took almost half an hour before the three men approached in the near distance. There was a young, boyish looking man. "*That will be Thomas, Mollie's husband,*" Susan thought, noting there was also an older man, in his thirties, who would belong to Isabella.

That only left her own soon-to-be-husband. Jedediah. Susan's stomach flipped a little as she saw him approach, and she wasn't sure if it was because of the nerves she had about arriving in a new town, or whether the sight of him made her feel slightly giddy. He was certainly the most handsome of the three, or at least, Susan thought so. In fact, with his chiseled cheeks and jawbone, his dimples on either side of his face, and his dark, floppy hair that was tucked under a cowboy hat, Susan wasn't sure how a man like this could still be a bachelor.

She took a deep breath and steadied herself. "*He might be*

handsome Susan," she told herself. *"But you still know very little about him."* She had to wonder - was something wrong with him? Why would a man so handsome want to marry her? Yes, Susan was stunningly beautiful, and smart, but according to most people she was damaged goods. Back home, she would have had very few prospects for marriage. Her only choices for a husband would be men who were too elderly to mind, or men, like her, that had some kind of shame hidden in the past.

"So what is Jedediah's secret", she wondered, as he rapidly approached her.

She knew, sooner or later, she was going to find out.

* * *

Susan wasn't usually one for social gatherings, and back at home she had sometimes found it difficult to make friends with the other women, but right at that moment she was grateful she had Mollie and Isabella beside her as she said her vows to Jedediah. Something about the man made her incredibly nervous, and she could barely speak as they exchanged their first shy greetings.

Jedediah reached out his hand to take Susan's small, delicate palm in his. She was wearing fine, expensive lace gloves, and she was proud of how she looked, that she looked fit for a wedding. "This is going to be the most special day of my life," Jedediah said, as he led her to the church, with the other two couples trailing behind them.

"Yes, mine too," Susan said quietly, reaching a hand up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. As they walked she took in the sights of the town of White Elk, such as they were. Really wasn't much

of a town at all, but that was as Susan had expected. She'd been warned as such, but it was still a little bit of a shock. She wondered how the people out here managed to survive with such few amenities. And so few shops.

"Hope you don't mind me asking you this, Susan," Jedediah started to say, interrupting her thoughts. Susan did think Jedediah was quite forward in his manner, but she could tell that's just what kind of man he was. Very confident, she could see that already. He continued on, "But why aren't ya already married?" He glanced down at the woman he was about to make his bride. "You've gotta be just about the most beautiful woman I ever did see anywhere."

Susan blushed a little. She was used to compliments about her looks, but at this moment they made her feel shy. Plus, she wasn't quite sure how best to answer the question. She had been married before. But she never wanted Jedediah to find out. In fact, she didn't want any of her new friends to find out about her tainted past.

Susan smiled, still averting Jedediah's gaze, as she found the right words to say. "I suppose I just never found the man who was right for me," she said quietly.

He gave her hand a squeeze. "Well, I sure hope you've found him now."

"So do I," Susan thought to herself. "So do I."

* * *

As they said their vows, and Jedediah picked up Susan's hand to place her wedding ring on her left hand, Susan found her hands

beginning to shake.

"You're not nervous, are ya?" Jedediah whispered, leaning in towards her. "Susan, please tell me if you don't want to go through with this." He held his hand still, frozen in mid-air with the wedding band poised between his fingers.

But it wasn't that. Susan was having a flash back, to the first time she'd gone through a wedding ceremony. It had been in very different circumstances. Her previous husband, Alfred, was someone she had known for a long while, someone she'd gone to school with, before they'd married at age nineteen. She'd been so sure on that day that she was doing the right thing. That Alfred was a trustworthy, kind man who would never hurt her. But she'd been wrong.

Now she was standing across from a man she'd never met. That she didn't know at all. Would this man hurt her as well?

She shook her head, trying to let Jedediah know that he should keep going, place the ring on her finger. Time seemed to stand still as she closed her eyes and held her breath, feeling the cool metal slide against her skin. She prayed to God. Prayed hard that this man would be nothing like Alfred. That she would never be afraid again. That he would take care of her, and love her.

"After all," she thought, last time, knowing the man she was marrying so well didn't turn out so great. "So this time, taking a leap of faith, putting my trust in God, that He has led me to the right man, might turn out to be a far greater plan."

The ring was in place. Susan looked down at it and smiled, as Jedediah gripped her hand, promising that everything would be

alright. He would make sure of it.

* * *

"So what do you make of the town?" Jedediah asked, gesturing around the town with pride. "Quite a place, huh?"

Susan was in two minds about what answer to give. On the one hand, the place was beautiful. Stunning. The sight of the lake with the grand mountains standing behind it was almost enough to take her breath away. On the other hand, she wondered how she was going to survive in a town without any fashion shops.

"It's probably for the best though, that this town has no place for me to spend money," she thought, as she looked around at the shacks and cottages that made up the town. "It's beautiful," she said. "There's going to be plenty for me to write about here, I can see that."

Jedediah raised an eyebrow. "Write about? What, do you keep a journal or something?"

"Or something," she said, looking away, keeping her head bowed. She wondered what her new husband would say if he knew she still intended to keep her career even now that she was married. Not just keep it, but grow it. She glanced up at the handsome man. She wanted to trust him. She hoped she could. But she couldn't open up to him. Not yet. Not when she still didn't know anything about him.

The lake shimmered in the distance, immediately attracting Susan's eye with its sprawling beauty and promise of mystery. "Wow," she thought, hardly able to contain herself from running up to its edge. "Will it be possible to go for a walk in the woods soon?" she

inquired, thinking that she'd like to take her pen and notebook out there as soon as possible.

"Soon?" Jedediah asked, furrowing his brow. "Well, you'll need to wait until I'm free to go with you, but..."

"I don't need you to go with me," Susan said plainly. "I'm perfectly capable of taking a walk in the mountains by myself."

Jedediah bristled a little as he pointed at the hills. "Those are dangerous places up there, Susan. They're no place for a woman. Especially not one on her own. There's all kinds of things hidden up there. I don't want you going up there on your own, wandering around, you hear me?"

Yes. She'd heard that before. She stopped walking and looked her husband square in the eye. "Well I might be a woman, but I don't think there's any place that is, or isn't for me. As soon as I can, I would like to go up there. On my own, or with you. It's your decision if you want to come. And it's my decision on whether I go or not."

Jedediah nodded, then turned away, as they walked back to their house in silence.

* * *

JEDEDIAH'S SECRET

* * *

White Elk, 1871.

Jedediah watched Susan, admiring the way her long, flaxen hair fell down her back when it wasn't tied up. Her hair reminded him of liquid gold, which she spun during the day, fastening it up underneath that modern green bonnet she wore.

It only took him one or two days to realize she was a woman with fine taste. He saw the way she pulled her delicate lace gloves on over her fingers, treating them with care. "They expensive?" he asked casually on their second day together, waiting for her to respond, though he already feared he knew the answer.

"Yes," she said, smiling, her voice smooth and warm as honey. "The finest I could find. I do so adore them." She reached up and tied her bonnet around her head and Jedediah was in awe that a woman that looked like her could want to be married to him.

"I'm going to have to do the best by her I can," he decided, reaching up to gently touch the scar that lay hidden underneath his collar. *"Once she sees what I really look like, that I'm not so handsome after all, she'll realize she can do better. At the very least I need to provide her with the material goods she needs."* He could hear a distant roaring coming from the woods. *"If that means I need to keep hunting, then that's what I'll do."*

But as he made the decision, he realized he had to commit to another one. He decided that Susan could never find out what he did. It would only frighten her, worry her. Perhaps even disgust her. He

needed to keep her away from the woods.

"So where are you heading off to, looking so pretty like that?"

She blushed a little, and the scarlet of her cheeks stood out against the green bonnet. "I was thinking I could take a little walk."

His stomach dropped. "Where to?" he asked, as casually as he could muster.

"Why, the woods, of course." She let out a little laugh. "Where else?"

He walked around and stood in front of the door. "Susan, there's lots to see in the town, before you go wandering off up there. Why don't you go and visit Mollie, or Isabella? I'm sure they'll be keen to know how you're getting on."

She dipped her head and tried to step past him. "Oh, they will be settling in to their homes. Have you seen the house Mollie lives in, with Thomas?"

Jedediah had seen it. The biggest house in town. For the biggest money earner in town. Thomas was five years Jedediah's junior - and thirteen years Kit's junior - yet, if you were to judge by who had the biggest house, the most money, or the greatest power, it was young Thomas that claimed seniority. "I still think you ought to go say hello. Check on Mollie maybe. She has the baby on the way, after all."

Susan stopped, pondering this. "Yes, hmm, you are right."

Jedediah reached down and touched her hand gently, still shy about touching her, and wrapped his fingers through her laced gloves,

just ever so slightly. "Besides, you're not exactly dressed for a walk in the woods." He nodded at her gloves, and then tapped her bonnet gently. "Maybe we should get you some more sensible garments before you go trekking around."

She bowed her head a little, looking embarrassed. "Yes," she said, quietly. "I suppose I'm not properly attired. I would make quite a fool of myself." She looked up, brightening. "I will go and see Mollie after all."

"I think that's a splendid idea."

* * *

Jedediah didn't expect Susan to be back for hours - assuming the two women would be caught up, gossiping about their new lives, and their new husbands - so he took the chance to draw a bath, in private. He pulled his jacket and shirt off gently, averting his eyes away from the scar tissue.

Once the water had boiled on the stove, he brought the pan over to the bathtub and filled it up, along with the cold water, right to the brim, sinking down into it so that he was completely covered. He wondered how long he could keep doing this though, how long he could keep the truth secret from Susan.

A long day lay ahead of him, and as he lay his head back in the tub he tried not to let the stress and worry intrude. Tried to relax, let the water wash over him. But he groaned as he thought of the twelve hour day ahead: six hours spent helping Kit chop wood, then another out on the hunt, gathering furs for Thomas to sell.

He buried his head under the water, trying to escape the thoughts, which meant he didn't hear the door open, or Susan's footsteps come tapping into the room.

When he saw the shadow of a figure casting over the bath he sat up, startled. "Susan..." he cried, reaching out for a towel to cover himself. But as he did so he only exposed his chest more, and he could feel Susan's eyes on him as she took a step back, knew she was taking in the gnarled skin, the tissue where the fire had touched, which had never grown back the same way.

Susan let out a loud gasp. "Jedediah...what on Earth happened to you?"

Jedediah quickly tried to cover up, bringing the towel up over his chest, before snatching a second cloth to cover his neck. "No need for such carry on, it's nothing," he snapped.

He watched Susan as she struggled to regain her composure. Finally, after a few deep breaths, she managed to squeak, "Did that happen to you in the war?"

Jedediah shrugged as if it was nothing. "Many men had a lot worse than this, just you believe me. I got nothing to complain about." "*Men like Kit*", he thought, for instance. What were a few burn marks compared to a missing limb? Though, if he could go back in time, he would make sure it was he that suffered the gunshot wound, not Kit.

"*It should have been me,*" he thought for the thousandth time, as Susan, who looked like a blur in front of him, tried to speak to him. Her voice sounded muddy, like she was speaking under water, and Jedediah had to shake his head, wondering if he had actually had his

head under for so long that his ears were blocked. But it wasn't the bath water. The ringing in his ears was coming from somewhere far away.

Susan's voice trembled as she took a step closer to her husband, trying to lay a gentle hand on him as he struggled to dress. "Will you at least allow me to take a look at it?"

"No need," he said, breezily. "I've lived with these scars on my body for years now, and they don't trouble me." He tried to say the words as casually as he could manage, as though he were talking about something as mundane as a pair of clothes. As though the scars were no more worth worrying about than a hat, or a haircut.

"Don't they...hurt? Or itch?" Susan asked. The girl was clearly concerned but Jedediah had had enough of the conversation and was already walking out the door. He buttoned up his shirt, concealing the scars from Susan's eyes and anyone else's, as he had a hard day's work to get to.

"I'll be back before dark," he commented, before he closed the door behind him, leaving Susan alone. As he stomped off towards the woods, and his mood cooled a little, he wondered if he should have walked out, leaving Susan like that, with barely an explanation. He stopped and almost turned on his heel, half-intending to walk back to the house, but then he heard Kit's voice calling from up ahead, asking for help, so he shook his head and tried to forget about Susan's shocked expression, the look of pain he had left her with.

* * *

Susan stood there trembling for a good few minutes after

Jedediah had gone. She'd seen burn victims before when she'd worked at the newspaper, war veterans who had suffered horrendous injuries, but they were all strangers. It was different when it was her own husband.

"He must be in great pain," she thought, finally taking a seat at the rickety dining table. The wonky table legs wobbled beneath her as she tried to steady herself. *"If only he would let me take a look at the scars, help him in some way."* But from the first moment they'd met, Susan could tell that Jedediah was not the sort of man who accepted help easily. He was stubborn, too sure of himself. And awful proud.

She tapped her fingers on the table, wondering what she could do. She knew that Isabella was a doctor, and keen to set up a new practice in town. There was an empty shop in the center of town which would do nicely, but it was very run down and dirty, so it would take a few weeks to get it up and running, and maybe even longer than that before Isabella could finally see patients. But she supposed that in the meantime she could work on Jedediah, try to get him to soften up. Open up to her about what happened. Then she might be able to convince him to see Isabella. It was worth a shot anyway.

She jumped up out of her seat, an idea coming to her. Susan was an expert at things concerning design, and shops, and modern things - why, she would be the perfect person to help Isabella get the practice up and running. She quickly grabbed her green bonnet and tied it to her head, as she raced out the door and down the hill, to Isabella's house.

SUSAN'S PLAN

* * *

White Elk, 1871.

Susan could have sworn she saw Jedediah wince as he took a seat in his wicker rocking chair that night. "Are you in pain?" she asked, carefully, not wanting to tread on any toes, or send him flying off out the door again.

He scowled up at her. "Only from chopping down trees all day."

Susan nodded as though she believed him, and took a seat across from him. "I have some news," she announced gently. "You know Isabella, Kit's wife?" He nodded drowsily, though his face contained the faint trace of suspicion. "Well, she's to open a medical practice in the center of town."

His tied eyes suddenly flew wide open. "But she's married."

Susan had expected such a reaction, and knew that her next announcement was only going to further excite him, so she kept her voice calm and steady. "Jedediah, when she is open to seeing patients in a few weeks, I was thinking, perhaps, if you saw it fit, that you could go in and see her."

"See her about what?" He placed his mug down beside him and leaned forward slowly, the rocking chair freezing as he balanced it steady. "I ain't got nothing wrong with me."

Susan glanced down at her hands, and mumbled as she spoke. "Well, you do have something wrong with you, and I'm worried that

you can't see that..."

Jedediah jumped out of the seat, sending it rocking back and forth wildly, and Susan had to lean back herself to move out of its way. She watched as Jedediah stomped out back into the kitchen, as she heard the clattering of pots and pans and various bits of china as he fumbled for a pot to find so that he could make another brew.

She sighed as the sound of boiling water came from the next room. *"That didn't exactly go how I'd dreamed,"* she thought, although it had gone as she had feared. If Jedediah couldn't even accept that there was something wrong with him, how was he ever going to seek help? *"You can't fix something you can't acknowledge,"* she thought.

She waited for him to calm down a little, as he returned to the room with two fresh mugs of tea. He placed one in Susan's hands and she smiled up at him gratefully as he sat back in the rocking chair. "Jedediah, I just wish you would let me help you..."

"Drop it," he said, as he stood up again. "I told ya already. There's nothing wrong with me. Nothin' for me to go complaining about, anyway."

"But it's not complaining, Jed. It's not a sign of weakness to go and see a doctor, if that's what you're thinking." She tried to keep her voice calm, knowing that he was at risk of storming out of the room again at any second.

"I don't need to go, Susan. That's the end of it." He turned to go, but before he went, he stopped and added. "And I don't want you going down there either, or having anything to do with this new so-called medical practice, you hear me?"

Susan heard him all right. She turned and left, without saying a word.

* * *

Susan took a deep breath and started down the path that led to the new medical practice. She told herself there was no sense in feeling guilty about going behind Jedediah's back - after all, she only had his well-being at heart. Sometimes, she thought, men were too stubborn for their own good, and they needed their wives to take the reins, make the decisions for them.

She pushed the door to the practice open, and immediately, Susan felt at home there. Strange, as it was only a new office, with the paint barely dried and that fresh smell of lavender in the air. But it still had a homey quality to it, thanks to the fresh cut flowers that sat out on the desks, the paintings of landscapes that hung on the wall, and the cheery demeanour of Doctor Isabella Greegeory.

"You look well," Isabella greeted her, gesturing for her to join her in her office. "Too well to be coming in to see me, in fact." Isabella sat down on her little wooden chair on the far side of her desk, and offered Susan the one across from her.

Susan took a seat and placed her purse in her lap. "It's not me I've come to see you about," she admitted.

"Oh?" Isabella asked. "Is everything all right at home?"

"Yes..." Susan said, unsurely, still not convinced she was doing the right thing, telling personal things about her husband behind his back. She looked down at her hands, folding and unfolding them a few

times before she finally spoke up. "Isabella, do you know much about burn victims?"

Susan thought she saw Isabella flinch a little bit. The woman settled in her chair before answering softly. "Yes. I do. Quite a bit of experience, in fact." There was something about the way Isabella spoke, softly, yet reserved, that let Susan know not to push the topic. Best to stick to her own troubles right then, anyway.

"It's...Jedediah..." Susan said, finally raising her eyes away from her hands. "I'm afraid he suffered some awful injuries in the war. Burns, to his body." She drifted off and looked away.

Isabella nodded for a few seconds, before standing up to move toward a small glass cabinet - locked - behind the desk. The key sat in the lock, so Isabella only had to turn it before swiftly opening the door and reaching in, producing a jar of pale pink ointment as she turned around. "This ought to do the trick."

Susan smiled, grateful that Isabella wasn't making her describe the ailment in any great detail. "You're a good doctor, Isabella."

Isabella pushed the jar towards Susan. "I'm only as good as my patients allow me to be. It's not so easy if I can't see his injuries for myself."

Susan picked up the jar of soft pink ointment and turned it over in her hands. "Erm, Isabella, how much is this going to cost?" she asked, quietly, turning her face down, feeling it flush red as she tried to hide it.

Isabella pulled an apologetic face. "It is quite expensive, I'm

afraid. Do you still want it? I can give you a small discount, as a friend, but there's still quite high price tag."

Susan nodded quickly. "I still want it." She would have to figure out a way to explain to Jedediah where the money went.

Susan smiled, then changed the subject. "Do you think there's any chance that Jedediah would come and see me himself? It would help if I could check the extent of the injuries. Make sure there's no infection."

Susan shook her head. She knew there was less than zero chance of Jedediah seeing a doctor . "He doesn't know I'm here."

"I see." Isabella smiled at Susan, showing she understood. "Do try to get him to use the cream then. It will really help. Soften the scars, allow them to heal more easily."

"I'll do my best, Isabella. Thank you so much for your help." Susan stood up and pulled her gloves back over her hands. As she turned to leave, she hovered for a second, before adding, over her shoulder. "Please don't tell Jedediah I was here."

"Of course not," Isabella said, smiling at her friend, her eyes emitting warmth and trustworthiness. "Please come back and see me if there's any further problems."

* * *

The bottle felt heavy in Susan's purse, and she switched the bag from side to side, feeling like the substance she had in there was burning a hole through the material. The entire walk home she tried

to rehearse what she was going to say to Jedediah, but nothing she came up with sounded quite right. She couldn't pretend that she'd just stumbled up the ointment by accident; he would never believe that.

"Perhaps I could say it is for me," she thought. *"Oh, but he doesn't want me seeing Isabella, even if it is for myself."* She wandered along, clutching her purse to her side as though it contained precious cargo, as she pondered this fact. She resented the fact that Jedediah had forbidden her from going to Isabella, for several reasons. Firstly, he had no right to tell her where to go, or what she could do. Secondly, even if he was suspicious of doctors himself, why would he begrudge Susan seeking medical treatment for herself? That seemed awfully unreasonable of him.

With that, she decided that would be the lie. That she'd burned her own hand on the stove boiling the water, and she'd needed Isabella to prescribe her some cream. *"Then I'll just casually tell him there's some left over, without pushing him to use it himself."* One last problem though: if Jedediah found out how much the item cost, that she'd spent an entire week's worth of spend on it, then he'd really be furious.

She was so busy concocting the story in her mind, clutching the bag to her side, that she didn't notice Thomas, on horseback, riding furiously towards her, till it was almost too late. She skipped to the side, as Thomas reined the horse back, tugging on the reins till the horse was standing on its back legs.

Startled, Susan jumped out of the way, as Thomas climbed down, full of wistful apologies. "Gosh, Susan, I'm awful sorry. Darn it, I wasn't watching where I was going."

Susan brushed off her dress, looking down to see if there was any dirt, or any stains. "Neither was I," she said, accepting Thomas's apology. "I'm as much to blame as you are, I'm afraid."

He took her hand to steady her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, brushing down her skirt. "Fine, yes." Then she caught the sight of her purse lying on the ground. "Oh no," she gasped, running over to it as Thomas watched on, asking what was wrong.

"My...my ointment," she mumbled, rummaging through the bag, hoping that it hadn't smashed. She was relieved as she reached in, feeling no loose ointment on her fingers. The bottle must still be intact then. She reached around for it, trying to find the glass jar.

Then she saw it, lying on the side of the road. It must have flown out as she'd jumped. The glass jar was smashed into a thousand pieces, and the ointment had seeped into the dirt and gravel of the road, not to mention the smashed glass. She cried out as she ran towards it, trying to salvage some, trying to scoop it up, but her hands were cut by the glass as soon as she reached into it, and Thomas dragged her away, telling her to be careful, admonishing her, saying that it wasn't worth hurting herself over.

But it was. A week's worth of pay lay there, seeping into the ground, gone now.

She reached her hands up to her face in dismay, smearing herself with dirt and blood. "Oh, what have I done..." she murmured, as Thomas watched on in horror.

"What on Earth has happened to you?" Jedediah dropped the armful of wood he was carrying and ran over to Susan. "You look like you've been in the war."

"Ironic," Susan thought, just shaking her head. "I don't want to talk about it," she mumbled, pulling herself away from him. Jedediah kept trying to pull her into him, but she slid away, not feeling like she was deserving of his affection, or his pity, right now.

"You've got blood on your forehead." He reached out and grabbed her hands. "And your palms are all cut up. Goodness Susan, what has happened to you out there?"

"I fell," she mumbled, pulling her hands away. She couldn't even look him in the face, she was so ashamed of what had happened. All that money spent, and the secret trip to see Isabella, and all for what? Nothing. She shook her head and walked away, hoping Jedediah wouldn't ask any more questions.

He followed her into the bedroom. "How did you fall?"

She sniffled and answered as honestly as she could. "Thomas came riding into town, out of nowhere, and I tripped, trying to get out of his way."

Jedediah stormed out of the room, and Susan heard his footsteps clomp right up to the front door. "Where are you going?" she called out.

"To give Thomas a right ticking off! That's where. He could have killed you for crying out loud."

"Oh, I've only gone and made matters even worse," Susan thought, springing off the bed, and running after him. "Wait," she called out, before she bowed her head and told him the truth. "I went to see Isabella...about your scars...she gave me this treatment, that can help them, but..." Her face fell, as she told him how she'd dropped the bottle, wasted all that money, all that precious liquid. When she'd finally told him the whole sorry tale, she dared to lift her head, only to find Jedediah was standing there, still frozen, his hat dangling off his hand.

He spoke up after a silence that, to Susan, felt like it lasted years. "I don't need you fixing me, Susan."

"I wasn't trying to fix you - only to help you. Jedediah, I don't want you to suffer any more than is necessary."

He scowled at her. "You mean you wanted me to look better. Look normal."

She frowned. "No...I...I don't care about that."

He scoffed and turned his face away. "Yeah right. If you don't care, why are you out buying fancy lotions that'll take care of the scars, hey? Why can't ya just leave me the way I am?"

"Because you are in pain! I can see that as clear as day, even if you try to hide it from me, even when you're brave."

"I ain't brave," he said quietly, his head hung low. "Kit was the brave one." He brought his head back up all of a sudden, his eyes gleaming. "And I deserve the scars that I got, Susan! I ain't tryna' get rid of them!"

"I'm not either..." she tried to protest, feeling like she was shouting into the tree tops, for all the good it was doing. "This isn't about..."

He put his hat on and pushed past her before she could finish. "I can't talk about this anymore, Susan. I wish you would just let things be."

"Jedediah I'll..." She tried to grab him, tried to stop him from leaving. "Please. I'll find a way to get the money back. Maybe I can talk to Isabella, explain to her what happened..."

All he did was shake his head. "This isn't about the money, Susan, and you know that. It's about whether or not I can trust you," he growled. "And right now I don't think I can," he added before he walked out into the cold night.

* * *

A CLOSE CALL

* * *

White Elk, 1871 ***Two Weeks Later.***

Weeks passed, and Susan, trying to keep the peace, left Jedediah to tend to his wounds by himself. She busied herself with her writing and her walks with Mollie and Isabella, as she wrote about her experiences in White Elk. One particularly bright morning, when the sun was making a rare appearance over the quiet little valley, Susan woke up to some exciting news: she'd had some post delivered. Jedediah handed her the letter and watched carefully as she opened it, hoping she would give him an explanation of the contents when she was done reading it.

She was practically jumping up and down, so he knew it must have been good news. Something exciting, perhaps. "Well?" he said. "Go on then, tell me what the letter is about?"

"Oh?" she said, casually, folding it up and tucking it into her apron pocket. "Oh, it's nothing." She waved her hand dismissively. "It's just from my Ma, back home."

Jedediah gritted his teeth, but he didn't say anything more on the subject. *"If she wants to keep things secret from me then she must have her reasons,"* he thought. So he simply nodded at her, giving her a peck on the cheek as he headed out into the sunshine, with the dark woods beckoning to him in the distance.

* * *

When Jedediah arrived at the edge of the woods, a shadowy

figure crept out from behind a tree to meet him.

"Hi Thomas," Jedediah greeted him, casting a look over his shoulders in both directions to make sure they weren't being watched by anyone. "You haven't see Kit stalking around here, have you?"

Thomas shook his head as he chewed a stalk of hay between his teeth. "Don't worry, this is just between you and me."

Jedediah sighed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Not sure I really like that, Thomas." Each time he came out to hunt, he had an image in the back of his mind of Kit struggling, one-armed, with the axe, all on his own. "I ought to tell Kit what I'm doing. I owe him that at least."

"Aw, you know Kit," Thomas said, still chewing the hay lazily. "He'll have all sorts of objections."

"It ain't right for me to leave him working on his own, Thomas. I can't keep doing this much longer."

"That's what you always say, Jed."

He swallowed, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, well this time I mean it. Things have changed now. Susan wouldn't like me doing this sort of work. And I don't like keeping things from her."

"It's for her own good, ain't it? Better she doesn't know. That way you can buy her the nice things, and still keep her safe."

Jedediah wasn't sure. Lies had a way of driving a wedge between people even when the best of intentions lay behind them. He wanted to give Susan everything she needed - everything she desired - but he

had to wonder if the price was too high.

"I'm having trouble keeping her away from the place," he noted, nodding towards the thick pine trees that stood tall behind Thomas. "She's real keen to get out here, to record stuff down in her diary, or whatever she does." He thought back to that morning, how secretive she'd been about that letter that had arrived. "I had to make up all sorts of stories to keep her away, and I don't think she's buying it." Susan was smart, he realized that. A writer, a woman who'd had a career all of her own before she'd travelled to White Elk. She may have written stories, but she wasn't easily tricked by fairy tales.

Thomas shrugged. "Just tell her it's too dangerous for her up here." He also cast a glance over his shoulder, at the dark, forbidding pine forest. "It ain't a lie, anyway; it's no place for a woman on her own, up here in the woods. Surely she's sensible enough to realize that."

"Sensible," Jedediah thought, with a scoff. Now there was a word he wouldn't use to describe Susan. She had a fair amount of common sense, yes, and she was intelligent, but she was also headstrong, and brave, and imaginative. Not 'sensible'. Not sensible enough to stay away from places that would scare off most women.

Thomas placed his hands in his pockets and began to walk. "Come on them, no sense standing around here all day. You've got bears to hunt."

* * *

With Jedediah gone, Susan whisked the letter out of her apron pocket and read over it again. "Yes," she thought, her eyes scanning

the pages. *"It's true - I didn't simply imagine it! They are going to print my story!"* She untied her apron and threw it down on the bench, before bustling out the door and down the street towards Mollie's house. She was so excited she just had to tell someone.

She knocked on Mollie's door and waited as the now heavily-pregnant young woman waddled over to the door and pulled it open. She beamed at Susan and invited her in, clutching her back as she went.

"Sorry to make you get up," Susan said, noticing the strain that Mollie was under. She frowned in concern. "Do you want me to leave again, to let you get some rest?" Mollie shook her head and said that was unnecessary, gesturing for Susan to take a seat on the sofa.

Mollie and Thomas had, by far, the nicest house of the three new couples, and Susan couldn't help but feel a little envious as she glanced around at her friend's fine things. She had to quickly remind herself to be grateful for all that God had blessed her with, and how much she truly had, rather than be jealous of what her friend had.

"Still," she thought, *"It must be nice to be married to a Sheriff."* Susan thought about her own husband, about how she barely knew where it was he actually got his money from, or when the next lot of money was coming in. He claimed he worked all day chopping wood, but she wasn't so sure. Every time she asked about it he closed up, like always, and didn't want to speak on the matter.

Mollie handed Susan a cup of tea and sat down beside her, her belly protruding so far out she almost knocked the tea pot off the table as she reached over to pour her own cup. "You seem excited this morning, Susan. Have you had some news?"

Susan nodded gleefully. "I have..." she waited as Mollie finished pouring her cup. "But are you sure you're okay? I feel a little silly telling you my news, looking at the state of you."

Mollie waved her hand again. "Oh, I'm fine. Besides, I could do with a distraction from thinking about this all day," she said, pointing down at her stomach. "Besides," she said, giggling a little. "I can tell you're just dying to tell me!"

"Oh, I am," Susan said, clasping her hands together. "I had a letter from the paper today, saying that my story is to be published in next week's edition!"

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" Mollie sat her tea cup down and reached over to grab her friend's hand. "Oh, I am so pleased for you, Susan. Is Jedediah pleased, as well?"

"Eh, not exactly." Susan reached forward and picked up her tea cup before taking a sip.

Mollie frowned. "He's not pleased for you? Why ever not?"

"He doesn't know," Susan had to admit. She sat back in her seat, thinking about how much she would love to have shared the news with her husband. Not that she didn't derive joy from sharing the news with Mollie, but it would have been even sweeter still to be able to tell Jedediah about her good fortune. But she knew how he would react. He'd be appalled to know that she was still chasing her own career, earning money for herself. She'd heard how he spoke about Isabella, how he thought Kit ought to be ashamed to have a wife who worked like that. So what would he say if he knew his own wife was earning money?

"Won't he realize it's you when he reads the paper next week?"

Susan had already thought about that, and made plans. She shook her head. "I used a pen name."

"Oh," Mollie said, then looked away from Susan.

"What?" Susan asked, frowning at her friend. "Come on Mollie, I can tell there's something you want to say. You don't approve, I can tell."

"I just know that you wanted to make something of yourself, Susan. Have a career. Become known as a famous writer. How can you do that, if nobody knows who wrote the story?"

Susan realized there was some truth in her friend's words, but she still felt like keeping it a secret was the best option. "I will know I wrote it. And you," she added, smiling, gripping Mollie's hand. "And Isabella as well, of course. I'll tell her soon enough."

"And what about your husband?" Mollie asked gently. "He will be proud of you, Susan. Oh, I really think you should tell him the news."

"I'll think about it," Susan promised, standing up and straightening her dress down. "I really better be off though, I've got a busy day planned. I'm going to go for a walk in the woods."

Mollie's eyes grew wide. "You're going for a walk in the woods...all on your own?" She lowered her voice as she placed a hand on Susan's arm. "You know what they say about the woods, Susan."

Susan sighed and chuckled a little. "Yes, I'm well aware of your fairy-tales, Mollie..."

"Oh, it's not just me. Others say they've seen strange creatures up there as well."

"I'll take my chances." She reached over and gave Mollie a peck on the cheek. "Now, you stay safe here, alright? I'm going to come by to check on you tomorrow."

"Okay. You stay safe too, Susan"..."

* * *

Susan arrived at the edge of the woods, and right in that moment, out in the clean, fresh, chilly air, she could have sworn she was all alone in the world. Even when she looked behind her, the town of White Elk was hidden safely away in the valley. She could almost pretend, for a while, that civilization had never touched the place, that she was the very first person to ever explore the place. A true pioneer.

She took a deep breath and hitched the hem of her skirt up, wishing that she could wear pants like Jedediah and the other men did. It would make for much easier walking. But, as she took that first step into the woods, she forgot about any impediments to her journey and simply took off, entranced by the beauty of the woods.

There was an eerie silence to the woods, she noticed that right away. She would have thought there'd at least be the chirping of birds, or the sounds of leaves crackling as small creatures ran below foot, but there was a real stillness in amongst the trees.

People did say nothing could live out here. Nothing could survive. She reached down and patted her satchel, feeling for the diary inside

it. She would wait till she arrived at a clearing before she started her writing, but she wanted to reach down and feel the comforting bump, which somehow made her feel less alone.

She squinted as the light grew thin. Pine trees were thick and she could barely make out anything more than a few meters in front of her.

"Maybe Jedediah was right," she started to think, as a nervous feeling started to play in her stomach. *"Maybe it is too dangerous for me out here."* She looked around in all directions, spinning around, as she struggled to regain her sense of direction. She'd always thought she had a good internal compass, but she was starting to forget which direction she'd come from, and which direction she was headed.

Finally she stumbled onto a clearing, and she gave a deep sigh of relief as the sun, which trickled through the break in the tree tops, warmed down on her in a thin beam. She still rubbed her arms though, wishing she'd brought a thicker coat with her. She'd assumed the walk would warm her, but if it was at all possible, she felt even colder than she'd been when she'd left the house.

She looked down at the ground, which was covered in twigs and broken branches, pine cones and needles. She stopped. "What is that?" she murmured out loud, bending down for a closer look. "Oh no..." she said, standing back up, looking around her quickly.

Blood.

She took a step backwards, her ears pricked for the slightest sound. If there was blood on the ground, that meant there were animals out here. Large animals, from the looks of it.

And an injured animal was bad news.

Very bad news.

As she stopped, frozen, completely still, she became acutely aware of everything around her, the beating of her own heart thudded in her ears, as she looked around, searching for any sign of the wounded beast.

Another roar, so loud the ground beneath her shuddered. Susan took a step back in fright, tumbling over. She reached her hands out behind her to break her fall, but she still landed flat on her back, her head cracking against a log as she hit the ground.

Then, for a moment, blackness.

She squeezed her eyes open, coming back to consciousness. This time there was another tremor across the ground; she felt it in her back as she lifted herself onto her elbows. She gave a quick moment's thought to how ruined her dress was, if she could save it with a bit of darning, then another roar blasted through the trees and she tried desperately to climb up.

There was a thud, and this time the ripple that went through the earth was not from a roar, but from the impact of a large body toppling over. The roaring stopped.

Susan realized her breath was coming in so sharp and ragged that she could barely get a full lung's worth. She reached up and pulled at her collar, straining to get a breath of air. She pulled behind her back at her bodice, feeling like the corset was strangling her.

She tried to keep still, tried to see if the noise had definitely ceased. Silence.

Relief finally flooding her, she tried again to pull herself up.

But then another noise. Footsteps. Heavy. Thudding boots that slammed against twigs and leaves, shaking the earth.

Susan, flat down against the earth again, could only see the bottom half of the figure that was stalking towards her. She caught a glimpse of heavy boots, and a shotgun swinging from a man's arms, the barrel brushing against the earth.

Her breath was ragged again, and she used all her might this time to pull herself up, but her dress caught against the fallen tree trunk and she was pulled down the ground again. All she could see was the shotgun, and all she could think was, *"I'm next."*

The footsteps reached her, and finally she looked up and saw the man standing over her. That handsome, chiseled face, with the dark hair that fell into his eyes and skirted his cheekbones. The scar that protruded, barely, from the top of his collar.

"Susan?" the voice whispered.

"Jedediah..?" Susan gasped, her head spinning as she tried to stand up. He walked over to her, seemed to be swaying from side to side as she blinked heavily and struggled to focus. He reached a hand out to pull her to her feet, but she was so weak that she couldn't heave herself up. She almost managed to pull Jedediah down to the ground instead, till he balanced himself. He bent down instead, and scooped her up, so that one arm was around his shoulder, and her legs dangled

off his arms, as he carried her through the woods and home to safety.

* * *

It took hours for Susan to get her strength up again, to come around to full consciousness. When she was finally able to eat, Jedediah brought her a bowl of stew that he had cooked himself on the stove. She took an unsteady sip, her hand shaking as she brought the spoon up to her mouth.

"Better you try to eat a little more," Jedediah commented, emotionless, as he watched her from a seat next to the bed. "You could have been killed, Susan," he added quietly. "Did you even think about that before you took off?"

Susan took a few more sips before lying her head back on the pillow, keeping one eye on Jedediah the entire time. His eyes never left her face, and his arms remained crossed over his chest as he sat and observed her.

She shut her eyes, then finally spoke, her throat dry. "Please tell me I imagined the entire thing, Jedediah."

Her eyes still glued shut, she sat and waited for a response. When none came she opened her eyes slowly and turned her head over on the pillow so she could see him properly. His arms were still crossed over his chest and his lips were still sitting in a thin, firm line.

He stood up, pushing the chair back roughly as he went. "We'll talk about this in the morning, Susan. You need your rest now." He blew out the candle as he left, shutting the door behind him.

Susan knocked frantically on Mollie and Thomas's door, feeling relieved when it opened almost immediately, but less relieved when she saw it was Thomas.

"Oh," she said, bowing her head a little. She managed to remember her manners, greeting him properly before she asked, "Is Mollie home?"

He looked over his shoulder, then turned back towards Susan with a frown. "Yes, but she needs her rest. She's not feeling so well today."

"Yes. Of course she does. I'll...I'll leave you alone then. Sorry." Susan half turned, wondering if she should just leave, but she couldn't; she stopped and asked Thomas instead, "You haven't seen Jedediah, have you?"

Susan watched Thomas's face closely as the look of something flashed in his eyes. He controlled his mouth for a few seconds before straightening it. Finally, he answered. "No. I would assume he is chopping wood, though."

"Of course," Susan answered, quickly and politely. "That is his job, after all." She bowed her head and apologized for wasting his time. "I suppose I'll go check for him down at the wood chopping site," she added, casually, turning to leave, wondering if Thomas would say anything in response to that.

"Erm, wait," he said, and Susan turned back around, looking at him as though she were surprised.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Just...I was down there a bit earlier, er, myself," he began, stopping to clear his throat. "And I think I heard some scary noises..."

"Scary noises?"

"Yes," Thomas said, nodding. "So maybe it's best if you stay away. I'm sure Jedediah will be home soon enough."

"Right."

"I can go down there and check on him myself, if you like."

Susan shook her head. Waving her hand casually as though to show she wasn't too bothered, she said, "Thank you, Thomas. But it's fine." She forced her face into a bright smile and bid him farewell. "I'm sure he'll come home soon. I'll just sit at home and wait for him."

As soon as she was out of eye-sight of Thomas and Mollie's home, Susan doubled checked that Thomas hadn't followed her, or left the house at all, before she broke into a little jog, trying to get away down the hill as quickly as possible. Although she hoped that Mollie wasn't feeling too poorly, she also hoped that Thomas would do the right thing and stay indoors to look after her.

Not wanting to make too much of a scene, or draw any unwanted attention to herself, she slowed down to a walk, trying to look as causal as possible, as she exited the town limits and began to walk towards the woods, where Kit and Jedediah should have been chopping wood.

She stopped when she reached the edge of the woods. There was

only one man there. Kit. Just as she'd expected.

But she wasn't glad to be proved right. She'd only had her worst fears confirmed. She approached Kit and greeted him quietly. "Good morning, Kit," she said, dipping her skirt a little. She liked Kit a lot, and wondered if Jedediah was also lying to his friend about what he did with his time.

"Ah, good morning Susan," Kit said, smiling at her brightly. "It's lovely to see you. Isabella has been raving about you constantly at home, saying how much you've been helping her out."

Susan smiled, as Kit went on to invite her and Jedediah over for supper the following night. "I'm sure we'd love to," she said, before adding, "You haven't seen Jedediah, today, have you?"

"What are you doing?" Jedediah asked, as Susan reached his arm, grabbing at his elbow.

"I just wanted to see..."

"See what I was getting up to?"

She stopped, struggling for the words to say. "Just seeing. That's all. You never tell me what you get up to..."

He kept stomping towards the house, as Susan followed him. "So I had to come and see for myself..."

"So you were spying on me?" Jedediah took off his coat and threw it on the table, as dirt went flying off it, onto the floor. Susan tutted as she looked at the dirty coat spread out over their eating environment.

"You know what Isabella says about bringing dirt into the house like that..." she muttered, walking over to remove the coat from the table, hanging it up on the hook by the door instead.

"I don't care what she says. She doesn't know anything." Jedediah was shaking his head and pacing around the room.

"Don't speak about Isabella like that," Susan said, offended on behalf of her good friend. She would rather Jedediah be angry at her, rather than turn his words against Isabella. "She does know what she's talking about. She's an accomplished woman."

"Yes...she is..." he said, scoffing. He stopped and caught sight of Susan's face. "I'm sorry. I've got nothing against Isabella."

"Besides the fact that she's a women who has a job," Susan pointed out, raising her eyebrows. But they were getting far off the topic, and Susan wanted to know what Jedediah had been doing out in the woods. She asked him again and he simply shook his head.

"What were you doing out in the woods yourself, Susan? I've already told you not to go wondering out there on your own."

"Yes. And now I see why." She stood with her hands on her hips. "You have secret dealings out there that you don't want the rest of the town knowing about." She stopped and watched for his reaction. "You probably made up all those fairy stories to keep people away, scare them off. Was that the plan, Jedediah? Some little plan you concocted with Thomas, no doubt. He tried to scare me off as well. Does Mollie know about it?"

"I don't know, Susan. Unlike you I tend to mind my own business."

Susan ignored the insult. "But that's why you did tell me to keep out of the woods, isn't it? So that I wouldn't catch you in this ghastly business? Did you really think I was that stupid?"

He shook his head. "No. I didn't. Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?! What does that mean? You hoped I would stay clear, then?"

"Of course I did. You should have been minding your own business anyway. I told ya to stay away, for your own good. And instead of trusting me, you went behind my back."

She stood still for a second, her anger threatening to spill out. She took a deep breath and prayed quietly, for the strength to be calm and patient. "Please, I don't want us to fight like this. I'm sorry that I went behind your back. I am. But I'm not sorry that I caught you. What kind of marriage do we have if we are lying to each other about what we're doing..." she trailed off, quickly averting her gaze, guilt spiking her stomach.

"What kind of marriage do we have..." she thought. "Oh, what right do I have to get so angry at Jedediah when I am doing the same thing to him?"

She stood up straight, about to blurt out the truth to him, but he cut her off, still raving. "If I lied to you Susan, as you say, it was only to protect you. I'm only doing what I need to do to survive. To provide for you. You wouldn't understand, Susan."

"Then explain it to me, Jedediah, please. I want to understand."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry Susan. Sorry that I wasn't upfront with you, but more than that, I'm sorry that you couldn't trust me. Well, if you think like that, if you believe that I would go behind your back without only having your best interests at heart, then I don't know what sort of marriage we have either." With that he left, slamming the door behind him, and as he pulled the handle with his other hand, his sleeve caught underneath it, and pulled the collar down, leaving his scar exposed in the dying light of the day.

* * *

SECRETS REVEALED

* * *

White Elk 1871 ***Two Weeks Later***

Although Susan tried to busy herself with her writing, and her walks, and her visits to her new friends, tried desperately to get lost in her new life at White Elk, there was a gnawing feeling in her stomach that she couldn't shake. She knew deep down what that feeling was: guilt. Guilt combined with deep shame.

"What's going on in there?" Mollie asked, leaning round so that her face was in front of Susan. The two women were sitting side by side, enjoying cups of tea, as Mollie hadn't been well enough to go outside.

Mollie had only been kidding, asking light-heartedly, but when she saw Susan's expression she put her tea cup down. "Is something wrong, Susan? Tell me what's happened."

She shook her head. "Mollie...there's something I want to tell you." She took a deep breath and swallowed. "I have never told anyone about this, not even Jedediah. You see, there's something in my past that I am greatly ashamed of."

Mollie reached out and squeezed Susan's hand. "You can tell me," she said, nodding down at her belly as she rubbed it. "I'm in no position to judge. Pregnant, with a second husband."

Susan sighed. She was quiet for a moment. "Your husband died, though."

Mollie sat there, wide-eyed. "You mean...you were married before, as well?"

Susan nodded. She couldn't bring her eyes up to meet her younger friend.

"And he's....still alive?"

Susan nodded. "At least, I suppose so. I haven't seen him in a long time." She barely raised her voice above a whisper. "He hurt me, Mollie. I had to leave."

Mollie reached out and put her arm around her friend's shoulder. "Oh Susan. I'm sure you've got nothing to be ashamed of." She rubbed Susan's back for a moment, thinking. "That does explain a few things though." She laughed softly. "We all wondered what such a beautiful girl was doing, out in a place like this."

"Well, now you know."

"Susan, I don't think any less of you. And...if you tell Jedediah, neither will he, I'm sure of it. That's what's worrying you so, isn't it?"

Susan nodded gently. She reached out for her cup of tea. "He has so many opinions about what a woman should be, and do, though. I'm not sure he will ever accept me."

"Well, you accept him, don't you? Despite his..." Mollie drifted off, and coughed a little, before she finished, quietly, "His scars."

"Of course I do, it's just..."

Mollie let out a little gasp, and grabbed at her belly.

"Mollie, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, I think it's fine...oww!" She leaned forward, sweat breaking out on her forehead

"Come on," Susan said, jumping up, almost toppling the tea over. "Let's get you down to see Isabella right away. Quickly now, Mollie. Something is not right. "

* * *

"Hey, Susan, what happened in the woods the other day? You never told me. Did you find any inspiration for your stories?" Mollie asked, her feet up on the table, as Isabella took her temperature. Isabella also glanced over at Susan, interested in the answer.

Susan sighed. "You could say that." She fiddled with her thumbs for a moment while Isabella took the reading.

"Hmm...your temperature seems fine, Mollie. A little bit on the high side, but not drastically so."

Susan wondered what could be causing Mollie's pain and discomfort. On the walk down, she'd almost fainted, and Susan had to carry her most of the way. It certainly wasn't the warm climate - in fact, the days were growing more and more chilly recently, even though winter was almost over.

Mollie swung her feet around so that was sitting on the table, with her legs hanging over the edge. She turned her attention back to Susan. "What did you find out there? Anything..." she lowered her voice. "Scary?"

"Mollie, don't be silly," Isabella scolded, and Mollie laughed. Even Susan had to giggle a bit at the way Isabella played 'mother' to the two younger women. But in this case, she was right: Mollie was being silly.

She'd seen something scary alright, but it hadn't been a monster. "Nothing too exciting," she commented. "Though I do have some good ideas for my next story."

Mollie seemed disappointed. "So you really didn't see anything at all? Not even the great beasts? How about hear anything?" She turned to Isabella to reassure her that she wasn't being silly. "People do say they can hear the bears and wolves howling."

Susan's stomach turned at the mention of the animals. "No," she said quietly. "I didn't hear anything. Didn't see any animals, either."

"Well that's disappointing." Mollie jumped off the table with a pout and Isabella had to put a hand out to catch her, chastising her for making the sudden move. Mollie tutted, to show that Isabella was being overprotective, as per usual. But Susan did have to wonder if Mollie occasionally acted a little too reckless. She was young though, just like Susan had been once. When she'd been just as reckless, thinking that the actions she made would have no consequences that could come back to haunt her later.

Susan and Mollie said farewell to Isabella, and Susan helped Mollie outside, linking her arm through her younger friend's arm, to help give her support. "I really am fine, you know," Mollie said, "I can walk by myself without help."

"You're getting real big now," Susan pointed out. "And there's no

shame in accepting a little help. You can't do it all on your own, Mollie." Susan worried, also, about how often Mollie was left alone, while Thomas was out and about, running the town. But the girl seemed hardy enough, able to fend for herself. She reminded Susan an awful lot of herself at nineteen.

Mollie glanced back over her shoulder at the practice. "Okay, you can tell me now that Isabella is out of ear-shot," the young girl said eagerly, keen to share a secret. "What did you really see in the woods?"

Susan sighed. "I think Jedediah might be involved in the fur trade. I believe he's making extra money on the side."

Mollie oohed and ahh-ed with bright, wide open eyes. "Ain't that a good thing though? To bring more money into the household for you both?"

Susan wasn't sure. She knew she still had debts at home - her old home - that needed taking care of, and she did long for finer items, and grand furniture, and some new dresses. She looked down at her tatty gloves, still ripped from the day she had reached through the glass for the spilt ointment.

But at what cost? She didn't want riches, or expensive items, at the cost of innocent lives.

Mollie gave Susan's arm a squeeze. "I'm sure he's only trying to do the right thing, looking after you. It's a good industry to be in - lots of demand for furs."

"It's also a dangerous industry," Susan pointed out. That was her

other great fear, that Jedediah might get hurt in his pursuit of money. *"It can't be safe for him out there, hunting wild animals, with no one else there for back up,"* she thought. She sighed again, as the cool air, blowing in from the lake, brushed against her cheek. "But he's so stubborn, there's no way I'll be able to talk him round on it." She dropped her head as they kept walking along the path to Mollie and Thomas's house. "He won't talk to me about anything, as a matter of fact."

"Keep trying," Mollie said, reassuringly, with the confidence and self-assurance of someone who was too young to know any better. "Men can be stubborn, and not open to new ideas. But I'm sure Jedediah will listen to you if you tell him what's bothering you."

But Susan wasn't so sure.

* * *

"I saw you this afternoon," Jedediah commented, before Susan had even had a chance to take her gloves off.

"Saw me where?" she asked, pulling at the lace gloves, folding them up neatly before she left to put them safely in their proper drawer. She pulled the wooden drawer back before looking down at the ripped, fraying gloves, and at the last second threw them in the drawer, causing them to unfold, as they fell haphazardly on top of the other items. *"Oh, what does it matter?"* she thought. *"Why bother taking care of such fine items out in a place like this."*

She stormed back into the room. "I was taking Mollie to see Isabella, as she was worried about the baby. Do you see it fit to have a problem with that? Or would you rather Mollie and her baby just

struggled on their own, without any medical care?"

Jedediah bristled, putting his hands in his pockets. "Well, no, I don't think that..."

Susan began to bang the pots and pans as she struggled to put dinner together. "I think you'd rather see people hurt, than see them receive medical care." She tied her apron around her waist and lit the stove, feeling more and more furious the more she spoke.

Jedediah followed her over to the stove, his tone gentler now, not wanting to continue the fight he had started. "Okay, I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was the baby who was in trouble..."

Susan spun round, her eyes wide open. "So if it had been me who was sick, or in trouble, you wouldn't want me to go to the doctor?"

"I just don't like you hanging 'round that place. Getting ideas into your head."

"What ideas?"

"These modern, strange ideas."

Susan shook her head and returned to the stove top. "Rather than spying on me, why don't you tell me where you were this afternoon?" She thought angrily back to the ripped lace gloves that she had thrown so carelessly into the drawer. "Out earning money, were you?"

"Yes," Jedediah replied quietly.

"Doing what?"

"You know what I was doing. Chopping wood."

Susan watched the water boil for a moment, till the whistling sound was loud enough to drown out the silence between them. She reached over and took the pot off the boil. "Yes, I do know what you were doing, Jedediah. You were hunting, weren't you? Just admit it."

She heard him take a frustrated sigh. "You're the one who wants nice things, Susan. If I give up the hunting, how are we going to afford those things? Cover your debts?"

She turned to him slowly, her eyes hanging low. She'd come to a decision, and before she uttered the words out loud, she prayed to God that her husband would listen to her. "I don't want you hunting, or killing, any more animals, Jedediah. I just don't." She looked up at him with her most pleading look, hoping he could see how important this was to her. "Please. Can you promise me you'll stop? We can find another way to earn the extra money. Or..." she looked around at the old wooden furniture, and the empty walls where she wished fine art work hung. "We can just do without."

He took a step back and walked away to sit at the dinner table. "I can't promise that, Susan. Not right now. Just drop it, will ya?"

* * *

Susan lay in the dark, with only the faint candlelight to keep her company. She heard footsteps enter the room, then Jedediah's voice, as he gently asked her if she was alright. "Susan, please talk to me."

She turned over on her pillow, her back facing him. "I just think it's wrong to cause the animals to suffer like that."

He reached out and stroked her hair softly. "You just don't understand, Susan. It's a way of life out here. People need the furs to keep warm. To make coats out of. And for people like me, it can be the only way to make enough to survive."

She rolled over and looked up at him. "But we make enough to survive."

"Not enough to keep you happy, though."

She sighed. "I can be happy with less. I promise you that. If you can just promise me that you'll stop. It's such a dangerous task - what if you don't come home one day? I'd rather have a husband who's alive and poor, than one who died trying to make a bit of extra money."

He hung his head, still stroking Susan's hair gently. "I wasn't sure you wanted me for a husband at all."

The words hung in the air for a moment, and Susan was touched by the sadness that lay in them. "Why ever not?" she asked, bringing her head up a little. It was difficult to see him in the candlelight, hard to make out the expression on his face. As the candlelight flickered it momentarily hit the bottom of his neck, where, just above his collar, some of his scarred skin was exposed. She reached out and gently touched the scar tissue. "Not because of these, is it?"

Jedediah pulled his head back slightly. "You're so beautiful Susan, how can you ever love a man like me?"

Susan lay there for a little while, chewing over his words. "*He must think me to be awfully shallow,*" she thought, with sorrow. She was

sorry now for every time she had commented on the fixtures of the house, or her tatty clothes, or made jealous remarks about how nice Mollie's house was. Yes, she liked nice things, but she would never be so shallow as to reject a man over a few scars.

"Jedediah, you earned this scars, fighting." She sat up on her elbows now. "Please don't think that I judge you for them, or that I can't see past them."

He pulled away even further. "You can't see past them though." His voice was deep and gravelly; there was a catch in his throat as he spoke. "You're always pestering me to go to see Isabella about them. Brought home that magical potion that you smashed that day..."

Susan almost burst out laughing at that description of the pink ointment Isabella had given her, and she had to bring a hand up to her mouth to conceal herself. She knew very well that this was no laughing matter, but it still amused her sometimes, how superstitious her husband could be. "Jedediah..." she said, gently, taking her hand away from her mouth, so that she could hold his hand instead. "That wasn't a magical potion, and it wasn't going to make your scars magically disappear..."

He looked at her, in what she could have sworn was dismay. "It wasn't?"

She shook her head, searching his eyes, as the candlelight flickered behind them. "No...nothing can do that, my love."

"Oh," he hung his head again, and gripped her fingers tightly between his. "Huh. Can't say if I'm disappointed or relieved." He looked away from her again, and Susan searched his handsome face,

wanting desperately to know what he was feeling. Was he really disappointed? All this time, did he think that the doctors held some magical cure that would take the scars away instantly?

And if so, why had he refused to visit them?

She kept gripping his hand, waiting for him to speak in his own time. "Jedediah?" she eventually asked, as it seemed like he had disappeared to somewhere faraway.

"I thought that you got that ointment for me so that the scars would disappear. So that I would look better." He cleared his throat. "Look normal. Attractive to you." He finally brought his gaze back to Susan, who was looking at him with sad eyes. She hated that he would feel that way, like she was trying to 'fix' him or turn him into something he wasn't.

"Jedediah, I wasn't trying to change you, or to make you normal, or however you want to put it." She gripped his hand more tightly. "The ointment was only to try to make the pain sting less. To make your life a little more manageable. It wasn't me trying to fix you." She gazed up into his eyes. "Why would I need to fix something that isn't broken?"

He looked down. "I'm not exactly perfect, Susan."

Susan had to let out a little laugh, as that was true enough. Sure, Jedediah could be stubborn, and secretive, but he was kind to her, and tried his best to look after her, even if he didn't always go about things in the best way. "Well, you're perfect enough to me. With scars or without them. In fact," she said, still gripping his hand so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. "I think your scars make you all the

more perfect."

He leant over and kissed her on the head, happy to hear her say those words. He held her tight, and promised her with a voice strong and unwavering, "If you don't want me to hunt in those woods anymore, Susan, I won't do it. You have my word on that, sweetheart."

* * *

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

* * *

White Elk, 1871 ***Two Weeks Later***

It was the day Susan had been longing for, as she skipped into town joyfully to collect that week's newspaper. She almost ripped the pages apart in her hurry to find what she was looking for, as she frantically turned the pages over till she found the fiction section. There it was, her story, about a woman's trip into the wilderness.

She read over it hurriedly, her eyes barely able to take in the words, she was in so much excitement. "*Oh, I can't wait to take this to show Mollie,*" she thought, almost jumping up and down she was so giddy.

There was a little tug in her heart though, as she started to climb up the hill, as the person she really want to share her news with was Jedediah. "*I know Mollie will be pleased for me, and I can't wait to see the look on her face as she reads it, but...*" she stopped as she reached the edge of the hill. Turn left, and she would be headed towards Mollie and Thomas's large homestead that stood at the top. Turn right, and she would be headed towards the edge of the hills, where Jedediah would be working.

She took one step up the hill, then stopped. Before she could change her mind, she quickly buried the paper in her satchel, before she took off right, headed towards the hills.

Part of her was anxious as she walked, and not just because of the newspaper story. Even though Jedediah had promised to stop hunting,

she was nervous that when she arrived at the wood chopping site, that she was only going to find one man there - Kit - and not two. She held her breath a little as she rounded the corner, praying to God that she would find two men standing there chopping wood, not only one.

At the trees loomed up ahead, Susan looked out and released her breath at the same time, in a startled little gasp. Only one man. She squinted, to make out the figure, and she could see, even at that distance, that the man only had one arm. Kit.

Her heart sank. When Jedediah had left the house that morning, he'd promised her he was going to work. And if he wasn't here, helping Kit - like he was supposed to be - then there was only one other place he could be. He must have been hunting.

"I can't believe he lied to me," Susan thought, clutching her satchel, as tears sprang to her eyes. *"And just as I was coming up here to share my own secret with him. Turns out I can't trust him at all."* She was just about to turn around, to head back to Mollie's place, when she saw a second figure step out from behind a tall thick pine tree.

"Jedediah," Susan realized, guilt instantly flooding her. She hated that she'd been so quick to jump to conclusions, so hasty to distrust her husband. She bowed her head and took a deep breath as she walked towards the two men. Kit spotted her first and waved and called out, as Jedediah looked up in surprise.

As she curtsied to Kit, Jedediah came over to greet her. "This is a nice surprise," he said warmly, his eyes sparkling as he looked down at his beautiful wife. "What are you doing out here, my love?"

Still a little nervous, she reached around to undo the buckle on

her satchel. "I have something to show you, actually."

"Oh, what's that?"

She reached into the bag and with trembling fingers she handed the paper over to Jedediah. He frowned, asking her why he needed to take a look at it right then. "There's a story, a few pages in, that I thought you might be interested in," she explained, blushing a little.

Kit looked on curiously as they spoke, though he tried to pretend like he was fully occupied with his work. As Susan watched him, chopping the logs with only one arm, she felt even more glad that Jedediah had decided to give up the fur trade. *"If not only for our sake - and the animals' sakes - it seems like this decision will benefit Kit as well,"* she thought. *"He looks as though he is struggling to work with only one arm, and now Jedediah will have time to help him out properly. Relieve some of the burden."* Yes, now she was certain they'd made the right decision. She looked away, smiling, to watch Jedediah, his brow furrowed as he read the story.

She waited, her heart pounding, for him to reach the end of the story.

"Well?" she asked, as she finally looked up. "What did you think of it?"

He turned the paper over in his hands, his face blank. Her heart was still pounding as he spoke. "I think it's a wonderful story," he said. He leaned on his axe as he looked at her with curiosity. "But I am perplexed 'bout why you wanted me to read it." He frowned. "Couldn't it have waited till I got home?"

Susan danced on her tiptoes for a second. "Oh, did you really like it?"

He nodded. "It was entertaining. Exciting. Raced right through to get to the end." He stopped and considered it for a moment. "That women who wrote it got real talent," he said, nodding to himself.

Susan was so happy that she was about to blurt out what she'd come there to reveal to him - that she was the writer of the story, but just as she was about to speak, Jedediah added something. "Of course," he added casually, "I'm just glad I'm not married to a woman like that in the story."

Susan stopped. "A woman like that?" she asked, catching sight of Kit watching them, peering over his shoulder. She shifted her weight to balance herself as she placed both hands on her hips. "What do you mean you wouldn't want to be married to a woman like that, Jedediah?"

He shrugged, pursed his lips. "She seems awful wild, wandering off like that, for one thing." He shook his head. "I'm just glad you're not that silly, Susan, to go off on your own like that. I'd never stop worrying about you." He glanced down at the paper again. "And it's not just that. It's the way she told the story, I suppose. Alright for a young single woman, I suppose, one of those modern sorts. But not a married women. It ain't right for a wife to write about her experiences in such colorful language..."

Susan felt herself go red. She hadn't thought there was anything too extraordinary about the language she'd used and she felt ashamed that Jedediah thought that. She stumbled over her words as she tried to defend the writer, without giving herself away. "Well, I think her

language was perfectly appropriate. And what's wrong with a women being a writer, anyway!" She snatched the paper back and shoved it in her bag, sorry she'd even come up there to show him.

"I should have just shown it to Mollie, like I'd originally planned," she thought, bitterly, heat rising up her body, so that she could feel it reaching her neck. She reached up to scratch at her collar, flustered now, trying to hold the tears back from falling, as Kit looked away, trying to pretend he wasn't noticing the scene.

"Susan, what's wrong?" Jedediah asked. "Why are you taking this criticism so personally? It ain't got nothing to do with you..."

"Never mind," she said, turning on her heels, as she headed back down the hill, stumbling a little as she went. But the last thing she needed was the embarrassment of falling into the dirt, so she stopped and steadied herself as she headed back down the hill, holding her head high as she kept a steady pace, only allowing the tears to fall down her face once she was sure she was out of Jedediah's line of sight.

But as she got to the edge of the hill, and turned the corner, now out of sight of the two men, she didn't cry. Instead, she shook her head and took a few short, sharp breaths. *"I'm not going to head to Mollie's house after all,"* she decided.

She was going to head into the woods.

* * *

JEDEDIAH'S REALIZATION

* * *

White Elk 1871

Jedediah was left scratching his head as Susan stormed off, down the hill, out sight. "Now what was all that about..." he murmured, shaking his head. He turned back to Kit and shrugged. "Why'd she react like that?"

Kit cleared his throat a little, still chopping against the base of a tree, but without much vigor. "I think she wanted you to react a little more positively to that story," he said gently.

"Eh?" Jedediah said, still scratching his head. "I was positive about the story!"

Kit laughed a little. "Not so positive about the writer, though."

"Well, why does that matter? Susan doesn't know the author of the piece, does she? Can't see what she went and got so upset over." He picked up his axe again and started to chip away at the base of a tree.

Kit sighed. "I think she does know the author, son," he said, raising an eyebrow. "And I think you know her as well."

Jedediah frowned. "Do I?" He pulled a face, furrowing his brow. "Nah, don't think I recognized the name..." he kept pondering as he chopped away absentmindedly. "Susan don't know her either, I don't think."

"Jedediah, you daft fool," Kit said, shaking his head. "The author IS Susan."

Jedediah opened his eyes wide, dropping the axe to the ground besides him. "Oh..." he said, gazing back down the hill. "Oh, so that's why she was so upset. Oh, Kit, I've been so stupid. Look what I've gone and done now."

* * *

"I'll show him," Susan thought, as she hitched up her skirt and began to stalk her way through the woods, branches scratching against her face as she went. *"He doesn't want a woman like that for a wife? Well, he's going to get one! The next story I write is going to be even more extraordinary. If he doesn't like it, then, that is just tough!"*

Still fuming, from hurt as well as embarrassment over her husband's words, she reached down for her satchel and pulled her pen and paper out. There was an old over turned log up ahead so she traipsed over to it and sat down. "Perfect," she thought, admiring the scenery. Her mind swam with the beginnings of a new story, of a woman who went out exploring in the woods and never came back again, and her pen flew across the paper as she struggled to keep up with the ideas that came to her.

She stopped to stretch her wrist out and winced a little at the cramp that had formed there. *"Time for a little break,"* she thought, as she stood up to stretch her legs and back as well. The sun was breaking through the tops of the pine trees, inviting her to come for a walk, to explore the area. She glanced back over her shoulder at her bag and notebook, deciding that it would be okay to leave them there for a short time. *"I'll just go for a brief wander - maybe only five minutes*

or so!" she decided, as she took off North.

Five minutes turned to ten, then to twenty, as Susan found herself in a familiar clearing. She looked down and saw that the blood, fresh the week before, was now brown and dry. She gulped, glancing around, wondering if she'd wandered too far. She pushed the tip of her shoe forward, so that it brushed over the dry, brown blood. *"Did I really do the right thing? Asking Jedediah to give up hunting?"* Though it pleased her that no more blood would be spilt, she also felt guilty. *"After all, Jedediah just told me I ought to give up my job, more or less, and I didn't like how that felt one little bit."*

She heard a growling noise, and snapped her neck around, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling up. *"Oh, I should have listened to Jedediah..."* she thought. *"Maybe he was right all along, there really are scary things out here. I've been even more stubborn than him, trying to prove a point by coming out here on my own."*

She turned back suddenly, violently, twisting her leg as she went, her ankle catching between two fallen branches. She cried out as she tumbled down, pain shooting all the way from her foot to the top of her leg.

She looked down at her swollen ankle. She tried to move it but, immediately, she winced in pain and had to keep it still.

This time, she wished more than anything that Jedediah was out here to save her. How she wished she'd never made him promise to give up his work. Now, that promise could end up costing her her life. *"What if I perish out here, without ever telling Jedediah the truth?"* she thought, clasping her ankle, thinking she might pass out from the pain. *"He was only trying to look after me, by hunting. Even his lies were*

only to protect me. I just need to see him again, get back to him, so that I can tell him I understand. I forgive him."

She wasn't sure how long she was on the ground for, as the pain shooting through her leg kept causing her to drift in and out of consciousness. Every time she came around, she had the same thought. *"Why did I have to go and run off like that?"* She wished she'd given Jedediah a chance, wished she'd been honest about the fact she was the author of the story.

Wished she'd been honest about a lot of things.

As the loud roar ripped through the forest, she had just one last thought. *"Please God, give me a second chance."*

Her eyes opened groggily, the pain in her leg almost numbed now by the swelling, and she thought she could see the shadow of someone, weaving in and out of the trees, fifty meters away, too far for the figure to have seen her. She heard the shot of the rifle ring out through the woods, and the sound echoed in her ears.

"No..." she thought, "He promised me...promised me he was done." She watched as the shotgun was cocked, then fired again, then dropped to the ground.

The figure spun around and Susan had both her fears and hopes realized at the same time. It was Jedediah all right, and he had killed the bear. He raced over to her and Susan wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or horrified.

"Susan..." he gasped, and picked her up, but this time, she wasn't about to let him. She kicked at him with her good foot, told him to get

away from her.

"I don't need your help this time, Jedediah. I can pick myself up." But as she tried to push down on the ankle a shooting pain overtook her and she had to lay back down. "I just need a little time," she said stubbornly, as Jedediah tried to lift her and she kicked him away again.

"Susan why are you acting like this?"

"Because!" she said, pointing towards the direction he'd sprinted from. "You're back out here again, hunting! Just like you promised not to do!" She wasn't sure whether the tears that sprang to her eyes were from the pain in her foot, or the disappointment she felt.

"Susan, stop being silly," he said, reaching under her again. "You can't walk on your own, for one thing. Secondly, I came here to chase after you, didn't I? I knew you would be in trouble, coming back here by yourself, with no protection. "

She reached up and wiped her eyes. "But you couldn't possibly have known where I was! I waited till I was out of your sight before I turned back this way."

He smiled down at her and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, being adventurous as usual. Too adventurous for your own good."

She didn't quite return the smile. "So how did you know to find me here Jedediah? Please, be honest with me."

He sighed, his arms still underneath her as he knelt beside her. "I realized - well, Kit helped me realize - that you were the author of

that story."

She bowed her head. "Oh." She looked down. "Sorry. It was wrong of me not to trust you."

"Susan, as soon as I realized my mistake I felt like such a fool. I came down the hill after you, and when I couldn't see you I knew you'd have come here. Just like the woman in that story." He gazed down at her curiously. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

She looked over his shoulder, where the bear lay now, silent, amongst the fallen branches. "Yes, I am. You saved my life. Again," she had to admit.

He pulled one hand out from under her to brush the hair away from her face, her bonnet having flown off as she hit the ground. "Is that the only reason you're pleased I came after you?"

She shook her head, barely able to feel the pain in her ankle now. "So you don't mind that I'm the author? Or that I'm keeping my job as a writer?"

"Mind?" He shook his head. "No Susan, I'm awful proud of you." He sighed. "I know it don't seem that way, but I am. I'm sorry that I made you feel so bad about it. Having you run off like that, putting your life in danger because of my stupid comments...Well, I wouldn't have forgiven myself if something had happened to you."

She turned her face away again. "It was my own silly fault. You're right, it is dangerous up here. Sometimes I need to face facts, and not be so stubborn. I've been so set on proving that I can handle myself, that I don't listen to common sense or reason. I know you only want

what's best for me..."

"I know you only want the best for me as well, my love..." he murmured, brushing his lips against her forehead, but Susan still didn't turn her face fully around.

"It's finally time," she thought, as she took a low, slow breath, closing her eyes for a second before she opened them again.

"Jedediah, there's something else I've got to tell you."

A silence fell, as Jedediah took a sharp breath. "What is it, Susan? I can tell it's something serious, if you can't even meet my eyes."

She nodded her head, so faintly he could have missed it if he hadn't been staring at her so intently, thinking about how beautiful she looked right then.

"Jedediah, I'm afraid you'll think the worst of me. If you think I'm wild because I'm a writer, and because I go off on hikes, then once you hear this you'll really think you've married a spoiled woman..."

"Shh," he said, reassuring her, as he lay another kiss on her forehead. "All that matters is that you're here, with me, now in White Elk. If there's something in your past that you're ashamed of, well." He smiled down at her. "You don't even need to tell me if you don't want. Just know that I forgive and accept you for whatever it is."

She turned her head and finally looked up into his dark, chocolatey brown eyes. "It means so much to hear you say that, Jedediah." She took a deep breath. "But I need to tell you, anyway. Enough of the deception between us. I want to claim that here, right

now, in front of God, we make a vow to start over, with complete honesty between us. So I want to tell you."

He nodded, brushing his thumb against her cheek. "You can tell me anything."

"I...I was married before..." she began, and explained, in simple words, the terrible things that had taken place. She kept her words short, and blunt, and as she spoke she kept her eyes fixed on a point just left of Jedediah's face, too scared to check for his reaction.

"Well, this is it," she thought. "If we're to start over, have a real marriage based on honesty, this is the moment." She wondered if Jedediah would simply drop her, walk away, find a woman without a spoiled past to love and marry.

But he pulled her in close to her and held her as tightly as he could. "I love you, Susan. And none of that matters to me. It's you and me now, and here in front of God I swear that I will love and protect you forever. Not just from bears, and wild creatures, but from any person who would want to hurt you. And I will never hurt you again, Susan. You have my promise on that."

* * *

THE END

EPILOGUE

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Twelve Weeks Later *White Elk 1871*

"The baby was so beautiful," Susan said, snuggling into Jedediah as they walked back to their house, following a wonderful dinner shared at Mollie and Thomas's house.

Jedediah nodded. "Kit and Isabella are the perfect choice for Godparents as well," he said, looking down at Susan for her reaction. "You're not sad it wasn't you chosen, are you?"

Susan shook her head and reached down to pat her own belly, wistfully. "No. For one thing, of course, I would never begrudge that honor from Kit and Isabella. You're right, they are the perfect choice to be Godparents."

"I'm glad for Kit," Jedediah commented. "And I'm glad he can finally retire from the wood chopping game, now that I can take over, full time." He squeezed Susan tighter, as they walked in the cool breeze. Spring had just come to White Elk, and although the temperatures had risen slightly, there was still a chill blowing in from across the lake, and through the pine trees.

"And I'm pleased for Isabella," Susan commented, as they reached their front door. "She is the best person to look after a child in case anything happens." She cleared her throat as they stepped inside the door, and Jedediah went to place a log on the fire, striking a match to fill the home with warmth and light. "In fact, Jedediah, I was also thinking she might be perfect for..."

"Wait there," Jedediah said, interrupting her. "I've got something to show you."

She sighed and smiled, standing for a second before she reached out and pulled a chair towards her. Better she sit down; she wasn't sure how long Jedediah was going to be.

He came back with a jar of something in his hands. "Speaking of Isabella..." he said, holding it out to her like it was treasure. "I've been to see her, on my own."

"Oh, Jedediah," she said, jumping up, putting her arms around his neck. "Have you really?" She pulled back and looked at him, before planting a kiss on his cheek. "Oh, I'm so pleased."

He looked down at the ointment, a little skeptically, but his voice was warm and happy as he replied to her. "Yes, she took a look at my burn marks, and told me this would do the trick."

"I'm so happy," she said. "And not just because of the cream. Jedediah, I'm glad you've gone to see Isabella for another reason because, it shows me that you can trust doctors now, which will be important now that we're about to..."

"Wait," he said, interrupting her once again. "I have one last thing to show you. This time it's a present just for you."

"Okay," she said, giggling, sitting down again. While she waited for Jedediah to fetch the gift she sat down again, glancing around at their modest home. Gone was her green bonnet. She fixed it up and sold it, and kept the money, putting it aside for something special. Something Susan was trying to tell Jedediah about, if he'd just give

her the chance. Also gone were all of their so-called 'fine' items, replaced by sensible, durable furniture that would do just fine for a young family.

She smiled to herself as she waited for Jedediah to come back into the room. He finally reappeared, holding a frame in his hands, glancing at her proudly. He handed it over to Susan and she gasped in delight as she looked over it. "You've had my first story framed...Oh, Jedediah, I love it."

"And I love you, Susan."

She smiled, and placed the frame in her lap. "I love you as well." She reached down and patted her belly again. "Jedediah, there's another reason Mollie didn't ask me to be God mother, you know," she said, a smile spreading across her face, despite her best efforts to contain it.

"There is?" he asked, looking confused.

"Yes, Mollie knows I am younger than Isabella, and about to start a family of my own. So with that, and my writing, and a husband like you, I will have my hands full." She placed the frame on the table, still waiting for Jedediah to cotton on.

"About to start a family?" he asked.

"Well, yes," she said, blushing. "Very soon, in fact."

He looked down, finally understanding what she was trying to say. He stood up, picking her up in his arms. "Oh Susan, are you serious? Are you sure?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms around his neck. She pulled back when she realized the coarse material of her dress was rubbing against Jedediah's old wound. "It's alright," he reassured her quietly. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

She squeezed him again. "I'm so pleased, Jedediah. I love you, my darling."

"I love you too, Susan," he said, feeling her arm around his neck. "You, and our baby."

* * *

THREE BRIDES FOR THREE WAR COMRADES

3

**PREGNANT, WIDOWED & PROTECTED BY HER
FLAWED HERO**

MOLLIE

* * *

1871

Mollie Hathorn gazed down at her wedding ring, spinning it around on her finger. "I still can't stop looking at it, Annie, even after all these months."

Next to her, her older sister shook her head, grinning, and went back to mixing the cake batter. "Well, maybe when John finally returns home tomorrow, you'll have something to distract you away from staring at that ring."

Mollie giggled and gave her sister a hug. "Oh, I am so excited, Annie, I could just burst. It feels like he's been gone forever. Three months feels like an eternity." She gazed down at her wedding finger again, wistfully. "We haven't even had a chance to live our lives as a real married couple yet. Getting married only a week before he went to war...only the day after I turned nineteen..."

"You had to do it then though, didn't you?" Annie asked gently. "Just...in case... you know. In case he didn't come back."

Mollie nodded. "Thank goodness he is, though." She broke out into a wide grin and dipped a finger into the cake batter, tasting it. "Mmm," she said.

"Hey!" Annie cried out in dismay, batting her younger sister's hand away. "I need all of this!"

"Well it is for my husband's coming home party. So I am entitled

to try the cake before it is served."

"Before it's even been baked," Annie pointed out. She placed her spoon down gently and brushed her hands against her apron. "Mollie..." she said, softly. "You do know it's not really a 'coming home' party, per se, don't you? John is just on leave. He'll have to go back to fighting after a few days."

Mollie bowed her head. "I know..." she said quietly, before bringing her head back up. "But do let me pretend, Annie. I miss him so much. Just, let's pretend he's back for good. Just for a day or two."

Annie reached over and squeezed her little sister by the shoulders. "Yes. Let's do that."

* * *

Annie gasped and jumped up and down as they saw the men approaching the large property. It was not just John returning home that day, but many of the town's men, brothers, fathers, and husbands to the many women who had gathered at the Hathorn's large home. The lawn was decorated with banners and streamers, flags were flying, and there were tables set out with drink and food. A celebration fit for a soldier's home coming.

But beside her sister, Mollie was still. Something wasn't right, she could feel it. She squinted as the sun glared down on them, trying to make out the figures that approached them.

Annie was still hopping on her toes. Though she was unmarried, not expecting anyone particularly special on that day, she was still filled with the excitement and anticipation of the occasion. She was

pleased that all her friends' loved ones were returning home, if only for a short while, and, most of all, she was excited for Mollie.

"Annie..." Mollie said. "Where is John?"

"What do you mean? Surely he's there amongst the rest of the men."

Mollie brought her hand up and shielded her eyes from the bright sun, squinting to try and make out John amongst the crowd. She scanned the line of men for the tall, handsome man she had married just three months earlier. Her childhood sweetheart. Her John.

She shook her head. "I...I can't see him. Annie - where is he?" She tugged on her older sister's arm. "Am I going mad? Annie, please, can you see him?" A panic started to enter her voice as she tugged Annie's arm again. "Please, can you look for him?"

Annie put her hand down and turned to look at her little sister, a dark look forming on her face. "I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Maybe he got held up somewhere, or he's fallen a little behind."

Mollie shook her head, and began to walk towards the line of men. She felt as though her shaking legs could barely support her as she broke into a jog, holding up the hem of her long dress as she began to run over the lawn. "Wait," Annie cried, trying to get Mollie to come back to her, but the younger girl kept running.

"Mollie..." her mother called out, from the other side of the garden. "Whatever are you doing, child?"

But she couldn't hear anyone calling out to her. All she could

think about was getting to the men, hoping she'd been mistaken, that John had been there all along, hidden behind someone, bringing up the rear.

She stopped, breathless, as she reached the line of men. As soon as she saw the looks on their faces, the glances of pity as their eyes fell away from her and stuck to the ground, she knew.

"Mollie," one of them said, as a ringing sound filled her ears, and she fell to the ground. "I'm so sorry..."

* * *

One Month Later

"Mollie, we need to talk to you," her Ma said gently, leading her towards the sitting room. "Sit down." Her entire family was gathered 'round, and Mollie glanced at them, wondering what they could possibly have to say to her. What they could possibly say to make her feel better.

"Mollie," her Ma started again. "We all think it's finally time you stopped dressing in black." Her voice was less gentle this time. "It's time for you to move on with your life."

Mollie scowled at her. "I can never move on with my life, don't you see?"

"Mollie..." her Ma reached out for her hand, but Mollie snatched it away.

"You don't understand," Mollie said, picking up the hem of her long black lace gown before she looked around at the rest of her

family. "None of you do!"

The next day her Ma waited for Mollie to come down to breakfast, praying the young girl would finally be out of her mourning clothes. The dreary, heavy black gown, that she had refused to take off for a month.

Her Ma sighed as Mollie came down the stairs. "Still dressed in black, I see." She turned away and shook her head, muttering to herself. "I thought our words yesterday might have finally sunk in. Made you see some sense. My dear, I do think you're simply dwelling in misery right now. It has gone on long enough."

"What would you rather I do?" Mollie asked, picking up the hem of her skirt as she swanned around to face her mother. "I can't simply forget about John, can I?" Her eyes began to fill with tears, her large, doll-like blue irises suddenly spilling over like an overflowing lake. "He was my first love...my only love." She looked down at the ring on her finger. Once the cause of her greatest joy, it was now her greatest sorrow. "We promised to love each other forever. In front of God, mama. I can't break that vow just because he's gone."

Her Ma sighed. She reached a hand out and placed it on Mollie's arm. "In time, Mollie, you will see that there are other men that you can come to love. Your grief won't last forever."

"Never, mama, never can I ever love another man," Mollie snapped, furious in her conviction. "I don't know how you can even suggest such a thing."

"I know it doesn't seem that way now, Mollie, but you are young, and in time..."

"There will be no time. My age has nothing to do with it. Mama, how can you suggest I could ever break my vows to John?" Her wide, innocent eyes were brimming with tears as she looked at her Ma, pleading for her to say something that would make sense of all this. In some way she was still a girl, so child-like, with her thick curls and rosy complexion. But the way she was behaving now showed all the passion of a woman with experience and heartache.

"I'm saying, love will come along for you again. You're still so young, and there's no shame in having lost a husband to war. You are a young widow; you've lost a brave soldier. No man will hold that against you, or consider you damaged goods, my love..."

Mollie hung her head, shaking it violently, so that tears sprayed out onto the carpet. "It's not about whether a man will want me, mama, and you should realize that! It's about whether I could ever love another man again. And I know, in my heart of hearts, the answer is no!"

* * *

The doctor sat across from her, clearing his throat as he quietly delivered the news.

Mollie drew her hands up to her mouth, gasping. Then, her hands dropped back into her lap, like they were a dead weight. "No..." she said, in a hushed voice.

The doctor coughed a little, not quite making eye contact with her. "I assume this is...rather difficult news for you."

Mollie shook her head slowly, her eyes filling with warm, full

tears. "No. It's wonderful news."

The doctor screwed his forehead up. "I would have thought a woman in your position, with a dead husband, would be horrified to receive such news." He looked at her with scorn. "How are you going to survive? Support yourself and this child?"

Mollie looked over at him, horrified. She stood up and pushed her chair back. "I will do just fine, thank you very much, Doctor. And from now on, I suggest you use a bit more compassion - as well as some decent manners - when you address your female patients!"

* * *

"A Mail Order Bride?" he mother asked, bringing her hand up to her chest. "Why, I've never heard of such a thing. Mollie...surely you can't be serious, child."

"Mama, I need a father for this child. This baby needs to be raised properly, in the eyes of God." She took a deep breath and swallowed. "And a husband for me. To take care of us."

"Mollie, you've got us to take care of you, and the baby," her Ma said, putting her hand on her shoulder. "Don't be so silly, child. You'll live here, in our fine house, and the baby will do well here. What more could you ask for, than to have everything taken care of for you?"

"Mama..." she whispered slowly, but her throat closed up before she could finish her sentence. There was much she wanted to say, but couldn't. The last thing she wanted was to seem ungrateful, after everything her Ma and Pa had done for her since John had died. But

to stay here and raise the baby, with no father for the poor creature? She couldn't bear to do such a thing.

"Mollie, just please, don't do anything without thinking it through. Give it till the morning. Sleep on the decision, child, please."

But that night, Mollie drew her trunk out from underneath her bed, in the room she shared again with Annie. Annie woke and pulled her covers back, whispering quietly.

"Mollie, can you really do this?"

Mollie threw the clothes into her bag, not stopping to look over at Annie. "Of course I can. And I'm going to."

"What will Ma and Pa do, when they find out? They will be frantic with worry. They wish for you to stay here with us. Please, Mollie, think of them."

Mollie stopped throwing around her clothes, finally, and turned to look at her older sister. "Annie, I am thinking of them; that's what makes this so hard."

Annie scoffed. "It doesn't seem as though it is very hard for you to do this."

"Well it is." She snapped her case shut. "And I am thinking about mama and papa." She reached down and rubbed her belly. "But I'm also thinking about the baby, and what is best for him or her. And what's best is to have a father, as well as a mother."

"But Mollie, you don't even know this man."

"I know he is brave. A soldier like John was. And I know he wants to marry me and take care of this baby." Her hand was still placed lovingly over her belly. She swallowed. "I need to go, take this chance while I can. It's best to go now, before the baby is born, so that it will be born into a proper family."

Annie grabbed Mollie by the arm. "But you can have that here, if you stay..."

Mollie shook her head, staring Annie straight in the eyes. "I can't. Men here aren't so willing to take on a widow with a baby, Annie. This is my best chance for a real family, of my own."

Tears sprang to Annie's eyes. "I just can't believe this Mollie...After all that you said, how you could never love anyone again, after John died..."

Mollie straightened herself up, placed her bag by her side, and gripped Annie by the shoulders. "I never said I had to love the man, Annie. My heart will remain my own, on that I give my promise. But I need to do what's best for my baby...what's best for John's baby." She gazed down at her stomach. "This is what John would have wanted. He wouldn't want me to stay here, lonely, like this."

Annie's face fell. "You're lonely?"

Mollie nodded. She picked her bag back up as Annie threw her arms around her younger sister's neck. "Oh, Mollie," she said, squeezing the girl hard. "I didn't know you were feeling like this." She pulled back, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Go, my little sister. Go and find your happiness."

Mollie gripped Annie's hand. "Oh, please say you are happy for me, Annie."

Annie nodded, still gripping Mollie's hand. "I am. Go, quickly, before the others awake. I'll be praying for you, Mollie."

Mollie picked her bag up and gave her sister one final hug. "I'll be praying for you as well, Annie."

"Be safe, Mollie," Annie said, before Mollie broke the embrace and fled from the room, into the night.

* * *

THOMAS

* * *

White Elk, 1871.

Thomas Doherty headed up the hill, away from the valley where the town of White Elk sat quietly behind him, with his friend Kit in tow.

"Forgive me for asking this, Thomas..." Kit started, and Thomas stopped walking, adjusting his hat and straightening his waistcoat when he heard the tone in Kit's voice.

"Why are you going to need forgiveness, Kit?" Thomas asked, eyeing Kit from under the wide rim of his hat. "Is what you're about to say going to offend me?"

Kit cleared his throat and turned towards the thick mass of blue-green pine trees ahead, the woods eerily still at that time of morning. "Not offend, I hope..."

"Well spit it out, old man. We've got work to get to."

"Well, it's just about this business of our brides arriving soon..." Kit said, still not looking Thomas in the eyes. "Ah, forget it, it's not my place to ask." Kit started to walk again but Thomas dug his boots into the earth.

"Ask me what you want to ask me, Kit. You're clearly curious about something."

"Well, it's just...I know why me and Jedediah sent for Mail Order

Brides. Both of us are getting on in years, and we were badly injured in the war." He stopped and nodded at Thomas. "But you're young. Just a kid. You escaped with no injuries. Why did you decided to go in on the plan with us? It don't make no sense to me, Thomas."

Thomas gripped his waistcoat and continued to walk again. "You're right, Kit. It isn't your place to ask."

"Aww, come on, Thomas, I was just wondering. You've got everything going for you. Surely you could have any woman you want for a wife?"

"We've got work to do," Thomas said quickly, walking confidently as he surveyed the land in front of them. He glanced towards the clearing, where the pine trees had already been cut. "Good," he thought. *"Plenty of room for expansion there. We should be able to build four or five new houses."* He nodded at the good work that Kit had done, with the help of Jedediah. As the newly appointed Sheriff of the town, Thomas was pleased to think that the town would grow soon, that they would be able to build more shops, have more farms, more trading options. *"Yes, it's all going according to plan,"* he thought.

"I guess I'll just get back to it then," Kit said softly, stopping when they came to the clearing. "You're right, I got plenty of work to do, and it ain't my business to be asking about your personal affairs." He turned away from Thomas and picked up his axe with his one good arm, the other lost during the war.

Thomas sighed, feeling guilty. "Ah, it's alright, Kit. I appreciate your concern. You're likely just trying to look out for me."

Kit turned 'round. "You know I do consider you a kinda son to me,

Thomas. I'm just wondering, is all. Makin' sure you know what you're getting yourself into. For the girl's sake as well as your own."

Thomas stood silently for a moment, tilting his face up towards the thin sunlight. "And the baby's sake. She's pregnant, you know."

Kit almost dropped his axe in his start. "Pregnant? Why, no, Thomas, I didn't know that."

Thomas shrugged. "It's no big deal. I'm pleased to be able to marry her."

Kit screwed up his face. "So...you're gonna be a father to this child?"

Thomas bristled, straightening up his tie. "Yes, why do you seem so surprised to learn this?"

Kit shrugged. "You're a little young for that, ain't ya Thomas?"

Thomas frowned, looking down his nose at Kit. Despite being thirteen years younger than Kit, he was a good few inches taller than his former comrade. "The girl...Mollie...my bride, she's only nineteen. Not so young to be parents."

Kit turned his head and muttered to himself. "I don't just mean your age..."

"What was that you said?" Thomas asked.

"Nuthin'..." Kit kept walking down towards the pine woods.

"No, Kit, I heard you saying something. I'd much rather you said it

to my face than under your breath. I thought there was more respect between us that that, after all that we've been through together."

Kit stopped walking and turned to face his younger friend. "Sometimes I just think you go rushin' into things, getting in over your head. Getting too many grand ideas. You're just a kid still, Thomas," he said, pointing out over the town, which lay below them now in the valley. "Yet you think you got it in you to run all this. AND raise a kid of your own?" Kit shook his head. "Or rather, the kid of a man you ain't ever met. You're dreaming if you think you're going to be able to handle all that responsibility."

Thomas was indignant. "I think you're underestimating me, Kit. I'm more than capable of taking care of this town, and this new baby." He stomped his foot in the dirt, and it echoed in the eerie stillness of the mountains, so early in the morning.

"And your new wife," Kit added. "Did you forget about her in the bargain?"

"No, of course not..." Thomas had to sprint to keep up with Kit, who was climbing the hill with long, quick strides. "But how difficult can it be, really?"

Kit shrugged. "Not difficult, for a man. But you're still a boy, Thomas, in a lot of ways."

Thomas felt himself turning red, and thought he might burst over the insult. "I fought in that war, right alongside you, Kit! If that doesn't make me a man, I don't know what does!"

"Alright, alright, calm down." Kit held his hands up and took a

step back as Thomas began to practically jump up and down. "I just meant...maybe you should give this a little more thought."

"There is nothing to think about." Thomas turned and began to stomp up the hill. "Do you need to give your decision any more thought? You're not having second thoughts about your bride, Isabella, are you?"

"No..." Kit admitted. "But she is not pregnant, and nineteen. She is mature, and she was a doctor back home."

Thomas raised his eyebrows, quietly thinking that sounded like more of a handful than a pregnant bride, but he kept his opinion to himself. "Well, I don't need to think about it either. Kit, you, me - and Jedediah - are all going in on this scheme together..."

"Scheme?" Kit asked.

"Well, not scheme. Idea. Three brides for three comrades. I don't intend to back out now. I am going to give Mollie, and the baby, everything they need. And run this town while I'm at it."

Kit shook his head and kept walking. He sighed to himself. "If you say so, Thomas...if you say so..."

* * *

THE WEDDING DAY ARRIVES

* * *

White Elk 1871.

"Wow, a woman doctor..." Mollie said, eyes-wide, as she kept one hand over her belly. She leaned back on the rickety seat, the other hand clinging to the hand-rail, as warm air blew throughout the wagon. "Sure could have used one of those back at home..." she murmured.

Isabella gave her a quizzical look. The older woman, kind looking, with crinkly lines around her eyes and sensible brown hair pinned back tight in a bun, asked Mollie, "So, you weren't happy with your doctor back home?" Although Isabella was also being sent rocking by the ups and downs of the wagon, she kept her hands placed firmly in her lap, her back arched straight, and her shoulders up high.

Mollie shook her head. "He weren't real nice to me..." she dropped her head down. "Made me feel ashamed of the situation I got myself into. I would have much preferred to have a women to talk to."

"Hey there," Isabella said, reaching over to place her hand on Mollie's. She ginned at Mollie and gave her a little wink. "You've got one now. And remember, you didn't get yourself into any situation. This isn't your fault, Mollie, that you've been widowed. I'm sure your husband was a very brave man."

Mollie turned her face away again, her rosy cheeks whipped and lashed by the hot wind that was howling through the carriage. "*How I hate this heat,*" she said, reaching up to dab at her forehead, hoping no sweat was showing. She glanced at the other woman, a younger girl,

closer to her own age, named Susan, who dressed in modern, fancy clothes and gripped a fashionable looking bag. *"Oh, I do feel so undignified, a lady in my condition, bumping up and down in a wagon like this with Susan sitting there, looking so beautiful."*

Isabella withdrew her hand and sat quietly for a moment. "You must miss him very much."

Mollie kept her face turned down, focused on her belly. "Yes," she said quietly, her voice almost breaking as she did. *"Oh, Mollie,"* she thought, *"don't start crying now. You've only just met these two women, and they are going to think you are awful silly if you just burst into tears at the slightest provocation."*

She tried to keep her eyes focused, as she forced her mind away from thoughts of John.

"It's okay," Isabella said. "Mollie, it's perfectly normal to still be grieving after such a terrible event."

Mollie brought her eyes up finally, to find that Susan was also nodding at her. "It's true, Mollie. Don't worry, the two of us understand."

Mollie sniffled. "There was a time when I thought I might mourn forever. That my heart would never be healed again. That it was so broken nothing could ever fix it.." She looked over the landscape, which was beginning to turn green, the closer to the mountains they got. She swallowed, setting her jaw firmly. "But now I know it is time to move on. I've got this baby to think about now, and my grief has to come second to finding a father for him or her." She forced her mouth into a little smile. "I can't afford to think about the past now."

Isabella smiled back at her, thinly. "Of course. Mollie, you need to do what's best for you." Her and Susan exchanged a glance between them, and Mollie wondered if the two older women were somehow exchanging a secret language that she wasn't privy to.

Susan leaned over and patted Mollie on the hand. "I'm sure Thomas is going to make a fine father for your baby. And a very good husband for you."

Mollie sighed as she watched the fields in front of them turn to green. "I certainly hope so."

* * *

"Well how am I supposed to walk a full mile in my condition?" Mollie asked, indignant that the driver wasn't going to take them the full distance to White Elk. She turned to Isabella, her face a fit of despair. "Oh, Isabella, and the men think we are to be dropped off in town! What if we get lost?"

Isabella let out a soft laugh, and, out of the corner of her eye, Mollie saw Susan suppress a giggle as well.

"It's a straight road ahead," Isabella explained gently, pointing up the gravel road that was framed by a green field on either side. "Not much chance of getting lost."

"Oh," Mollie said, dropping her head. Now she was convinced that Susan and Isabella thought she was very silly. She glanced up. "I suppose I should have read the sign."

Isabella placed an arm underneath Mollie to support her on the

walk. As Mollie thanked her, and began the journey, she added, "Isabella, sometimes I don't know what's come over me lately. It's as though the baby has affected my thoughts at times. I get so foggy in my head, like it is full of cotton wool."

Isabella smiled down warmly at the younger girl, with her ringlets and full, plump cheeks. "That's all perfectly normal, I'm afraid. Your doctor really didn't tell you much, did he?"

Mollie shook her head. "Not that I minded. I didn't like being around him much." She glanced up at Isabella, as the cool air blowing in from the White Elk lake passed over both their faces. "I'm so glad to have you here with me now, Isabella. I can't tell you what a relief it is."

Isabella gave her a squeeze. "I'm glad you're here too, Mollie. Now," she said, setting Mollie down for a moment, as three figures approached them in the distance. "I believe these are the men we came here to meet."

Mollie gasped, and instinctively reached a hand down protectively over her belly. *"Please God,"* she prayed. *"Let Thomas be a kind and honest man, and a good father to this child."*

* * *

Mollie was startled by how young Thomas looked. He'd said in his letters that he was twenty, but to her, he seemed a year or two younger still. *"He doesn't look like someone who could have fought in a war,"* she thought, glancing over his flaxen blonde hair and blue eyes.

"I wonder if he can really make a good father and husband, he looks

so young."

Thomas walked over to her and smiled at her shyly. "I'm awful glad you're here, Mollie," he said, in a voice that was a smooth, honey-like drawl, warm, and deeper than his looks would have implied. "Been waiting for you a long time."

She looked down, too shy to make eye contact with him. *"I wonder if I will ever be able to look at him,"* she thought, running a hand self-consciously over her full stomach. *"This is not how I wanted to look on my wedding day. So full and heavy looking. So awkward. How can he ever love a damaged girl like me?"*

"We're going to head down to the chapel now," Thomas said, interrupting her thoughts. "Of course, if that's okay with you." He let out a nervous chuckle. "Maybe you want to jump straight back on that wagon and run away again."

Part of her did want to do just that. Her breath started to come short and ragged, and she found her throat tightening a little. Keeping her eyes firmly peeled on the ground, she started to wonder if she was doing the right thing. *"Oh, what if this is all a big mistake,"* she worried, reaching up to clasp at the cross around her neck. *"John is barely cold in his grave, and I am out here, about to get married to a perfect stranger!"* Her heart began to pound so loudly that she was worried Thomas would be able to hear it.

"Mollie, are you okay?" Thomas said, taking a step towards her. All she could see was his smart, heavy black boots on the ground, coming a step closer.

"I'm..." she said, breathlessly, reaching out a hand to steady

herself, but all she could grasp was thin air. She took a step backwards, trying to reach for anything to hold onto, but before she could find anything, her world turned to black and she hit the ground with a thud.

* * *

"Is she okay? Is this normal?" All Mollie could hear was Thomas's frantic voice as she opened her eyes to see him and Isabella leaning over her.

Isabella had her hand on Mollie's neck, checking for her pulse. She pulled away as she saw Mollie come back to consciousness. Isabella straightened up and turned towards a still frantic Thomas. "Not too unusual in a pregnant woman, I'm afraid. Fainting spells are quite common." She straightened up. "And Mollie has had a long journey."

Thomas nodded. "Of course..." he said, his voice still heavy with worry as he turned back to Mollie. "You've come all this way just to meet me." He sighed, and his jaw tensed, the veins in his neck showing. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mollie. I shouldn't have asked you to come here."

Mollie sat herself up on her elbows, still dizzy, as she shook her head. "No..." she croaked. "Don't be sorry, Thomas. I wanted to come." She coughed, trying to focus her eyes, as they felt dry and full of fog. "You can't blame yourself for this."

"Are you well enough to stand up?" Thomas asked. "Here, I will help you."

Mollie nodded a little as Thomas reached a hand underneath her to lift her up. The time for coyness had long passed as Mollie felt herself hoisted up. Once both her feet were back on the ground, Thomas placed both of his hands on her arms, then bent down to look her in the eyes. "You still look a little glassy eyed, Mollie. Are you sure you're ready to go through with the ceremony?"

"I'm ready," she said, smiling up at him. "More than ready."

* * *

Thomas kept a tight grip on her hand as they made their way into the church. The excitement of Mollie fainting had caused a bit of commotion amongst the others, as they murmured among themselves as the youngest couple, Thomas and Mollie, were the last to enter the church.

"How are you feeling?" Thomas whispered, right before they were due to exchange their vows. Mollie glanced down at the finger where her old ring had once been, noticing how bare it now looked.

"Much better now." She forced her eyes away from her hand and smiled up at him, noticing, for the first time, that he had deep green eyes, a shade she had never seen before. Still shy, but growing slowly in confidence now, she clutched a bunch of white flowers while Thomas reached over to place the wedding band on her left finger. To make it whole again.

The metal felt cool against her hot skin, but it fit perfectly, and warmth filled her heart as she looked down at it. "*This is it,*" she thought. "*No turning back now, we've said our vows in front of God and made our promise.*" She looked down at her belly. "*You're going to be*

safe, and taken care of now," she said, silently, to the child that was growing inside her.

"It's all going to be okay," she said again silently. This time as much to herself as to the unborn child.

But as they left the chapel, and the cool wind hit Mollie's face, that pounding in her heart started up again, and the tightness around her chest felt as if it might suffocate her.

* * *

A PROMISE IS MADE

* * *

White Elk
Two Weeks Later

Mollie walked along the road happily, Susan next to her, the tightness in her stomach gone for the first time in days. "I think it must be due to this cool, country air," Mollie commented. "I'm really feeling much better."

"That's wonderful news," Susan said, giving her friend a little squeeze on the arm. "Isabella and I were so worried about you the other day. But I'm sure now that you've got Thomas looking after you, you do seem to be on the mend."

"Yes," Mollie replied quietly.

"He is looking after you, isn't he?" Susan asked, casting her a look out of the corner of her eye.

"Yes, of course he is," Mollie replied quickly. "He's just the sort of husband I was hoping to get. God has certainly answered my prayers."

* * *

Once Kit and Jedediah had left, Mollie busied herself straightening the tablecloth for supper. "Thomas..." she said slowly, as he glanced up from his chair, where he was smoking his tobacco pipe and reading the newspaper.

"Yes?" He placed his pipe down. "What's on your mind, Mollie? You've been awful quiet since those two left. They didn't say anything

to upset you, did they?"

Mollie shook her head. "Oh no, nothing like that. They were perfectly polite." She picked up a napkin and straightened it, before setting it back down. "Thomas, I couldn't help but notice that Kit and Jedediah both have very bad injuries..."

Thomas cleared his throat, and sat his paper down as well. "Yes. They suffered terribly in the war."

"And you served together, alongside each other, is that right?" Mollie sat down her napkin.

Thomas nodded. "Kit was in charge of our battalion. Jedediah and I served beside each other, at the same ranking."

"But he is older than you as well, isn't he?" Mollie frowned.

"Yes," Thomas said, leaning forward, so that his elbows were on his knees. "Five years older. And Kit, more than a decade." He sat, thoughtfully, for a moment. "Now that we are all back home, everything is different..." his voice trailed off, and Mollie saw a faraway look enter his eyes. "Nothing can go back to how it used to be." He picked his paper back up and flipped through it to find his spot. "But those two think it oughta."

"What do you mean?" Mollie placed a hand on her hips.

"Before we went out to fight, I was just a boy. Kit and Jedediah were the men of the town. But now, with those two injured, I've had to step up. Become the number one man around here. But instead of being grateful to me, Kit and Jedediah hold it against me. Reckon I'm

getting ideas above my station. Biting off more than I can chew."

Mollie was quiet for a moment. "Perhaps they are envious of you, Thomas. Because you're young, and you returned back from the war unharmed. You're not badly injured, like the two of them. You must have been very lucky."

Thomas kept his eyes fixed firmly on the paper in front of him, but his eyes had stopped moving. "Come on," he said abruptly, chucking the paper onto the floor. "Let's eat supper. I'm starving."

* * *

"Are you off to work again?" Mollie asked. "But, Thomas I thought you could take at least one day off." She stepped in front of him, blocking his way to the door. Over her shoulder she could see the dark clouds forming, not a drop of blue visible in the sky. *"Oh, I don't like to be left alone in bad weather such as this,"* she thought, anxiously.

"Mollie," he said, pulling his coat sleeves over his arms, stepping in front of her. "Please, I need to get past. Don't be silly. There's a lot involved in the running of this town, and there's no one else to do it..."

Mollie crossed her arms. "Doesn't seem like there's much to it to me." She waved a hand towards the window. "A tiny town like this, with three shops and just a hundred residents? What could possibly be taking up all of your time?"

Thomas sighed. "You don't understand, Mollie. There's more to it than meets the eye."

"Do you know what I think?" Mollie asked, setting her mouth in a

firm line. "I think you just don't want to be here, at home, with me." She reached down and rubbed a hand over her belly. "I think I am too much of a burden for you."

He looked up from tying his boots; his face had fallen dark. "That's not true. How can you say that?" He stood up, straightening his jacket as he went.

"Well it seems very obvious to me, that you would rather be working than spending time with me," Mollie said, walking over to him. She was easy on her feet as she went, almost toppling forward as the weight of her belly pulled her forward. "Oh dear..." she said, reaching a hand up to her brow.

"Is everything okay?" Thomas asked, his voice switching from annoyance to concern. "Mollie, sit down. It's not good for to upset yourself like this."

"Upset myself? You're the one upsetting me!" she cried. "You're going out to work, again, when you haven't been here at home for ten days now. That's what is upsetting me; I'm not just upsetting myself. What do you think, that I'm so silly I can't control my own emotions?"

"Shh," Thomas said, reaching out out to rub her shoulders. "Okay, okay, you are right. You're clearly not feeling very well." He reached up and took his hat off, placing it behind him on the hook by the door. "I will stay home with you."

"Really?" Mollie looked up, her breathing coming more calmly. She looked down. "Oh, now I feel bad, Thomas. If you need to go to work, you should go. I know you're only providing for me and the baby." She glanced around at the fine, expensive dining table, with its

finely crafted chairs, and place settings made of silver and the very best porcelain. "I should be more grateful for all that you do."

"Mollie, please, sit down," Thomas said, taking a big sigh as he pulled a chair out for her. "Work isn't everything. I should be more concerned with how you are feeling." He sat down next to her and took her hand. "Do you need to see Isabella? What feels wrong?"

"Just my chest and stomach, again, like how I was feeling before our wedding..." she said, glancing down at the ring around her finger. She touched it absentmindedly with her other hand, spinning it around on her finger. It was a little loose at times, but other times, when her fingers were swollen, it felt so tight it might cut off the circulation to her finger.

Thomas looked worried. "Mollie, you fainted that day. You're not going to faint now, are you?"

She shook her head. "I feel a little better now. Now that you're staying home with me."

"Why don't you go lie down for a little while?"

Mollie nodded and stood up, still a little unsteady, so Thomas helped her to the bed, making sure she was comfortable before he left her. "I'll just be outside if you need me, Mollie," he said, as she drifted off to sleep, smiling.

"Okay, Thomas. Thank you."

* * *

Mollie's eyes sprang open, and she stretched her arms up,

throwing the blankets off her. She smiled to herself, feeling much better, relief flooding over her as she remembered that Thomas was at home that day. She sat up and put her bare feet onto the bare floor, pulling them back, wincing, as the cold floorboards hit them. She reached down for her slippers and pulled them on before she shuffled back into the dining room, expecting to see Thomas there, sitting, perhaps, reading his paper and smoking his pipe.

But the room, and the house, was silent. *"Perhaps he's just trying to be quiet, letting me sleep. That's thoughtful of him."* "Thomas?" she asked, spinning around, searching. "Thomas?" she called again raising her voice a little this time. "I'm feeling much better, you don't have to worry about waking me. Hello? Where are you?"

When there was still no response she decided he must have gone outside for a moment, perhaps to gather firewood or to see to his horse. She switched her slippers for shoes and walked through the sitting room to the back door, which led to their large back garden. They had the largest property in White Elk, largely thanks to Thomas's job and position in the town. Out back was a shed, as well as a horse paddock, and a place for keeping chickens. She wandered down, over the grass that was growing just that little too long, still calling out for Thomas. "Thomas, are you down there?" she asked, glancing uneasily towards the shed. Something about the place had always freaked her out. Unlike their house, which was modern and freshly painted, the shed was hammered together unevenly, with nails sticking out and cracks between the wood. Inside lay rifles and knives, tools and other things she didn't like to think about.

"You're not in the shed, are you?" she asked, as she approached slowly, taking a deep breath before she clenched the handle and pulled it back, holding her breath as she went.

Empty.

She took a step back, dropping the handle, leaving the door to bang into the wood.

She let out a long heavy sigh.

"He's not here..." she realized, spinning around to look at the empty garden. *"He's gone out somewhere, to work no doubt."*

Dejected, she turned back, and walked slowly back to the house, clutching her heavy belly as she went. All of a sudden she wasn't feeling so well again.

* * *

"Where have you been?" Mollie asked quietly, when Thomas finally walked in the door, hours later.

"Mollie, you're up," he said, sounding surprised. "You were so dead asleep I thought you'd sleep right through to the evening."

"Hoping I would, more like it," she said, looking down at the table, digging her nail into it so that she made an indent through the varnish, right through to the timber below.

Thomas walked over and took a seat. "Hoping you would get plenty of rest, yes."

"That's not what I meant," she said, her face dark, looking away from him. "You were hoping to get back in through the door before I woke, so that I wouldn't know you were gone."

Thomas sighed. "I only thought, what use was I doing, staying at home, when you didn't really need me? Mollie, you were fast asleep..."

"That's not the point. I still needed you here, even if I was asleep."

"Whatever for?" Thomas asked, sounding genuinely confused. "How could I help you if you weren't even awake?"

She looked up at him. "You don't get it, do you? It's just the knowing that you were home. Here when I needed you. The security. The reassurance."

He sighed again, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Mollie, if you felt like that, as though I'd abandoned you. I really didn't see what harm it was doing to head out for a little while, as you were sleeping..."

"Were you at work?" Mollie snapped.

"No," Thomas asked, setting his jaw firmly. He sat back in his seat and stared at her. "I wasn't at work, actually. I had some other business to attend to."

Mollie scoffed. "I don't believe you. It's always work with you. That seems to be all you ever do." She glanced back down at the varnish, still digging her fingernail into it, slowly peeling away at the finish.

"Mollie, I am telling you the truth. I wasn't working."

She looked up. "Where were you, then?"

His jaw was still set firmly, and he stared at her with his pale

green eyes. She couldn't help thinking, in that moment, that he suddenly didn't look so young to her anymore. "Thomas?" she said. "Where were you?"

He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "Do I need to explain to you where I am every moment of the day?"

"If you are secretly sneaking out, then yes, you do!" Mollie pushed her chair back to stand up as well, but the movement sent a sudden rush of blood to her head, and she had to sit back down again, the room spinning before her. "Woah..." she muttered, putting her head down in her hands.

"Mollie, what's wrong?" Thomas reached a hand out to her, but she swatted it away.

"Nothing," she snapped. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine..."

"What do you worry, anyway? You're clearly not concerned with my health, or how I am feeling..."

"Mollie, that's not true."

"It is true." She kept her head hung in her hands. "You can't just abandon me when I need you, then try and act all concerned later."

"Mollie..." he reached his arm out again to gently rub her back, and this time she didn't swat it away. "Honestly, I am sorry I left, now. I thought you were fine."

He kept rubbing gently across her back. "I should have known

better. I didn't think any harm could come, really." He looked down at Mollie, who still had her head forward, her golden brown curls falling over her head, onto the table. "Now I feel terrible. Maybe my leaving has made you feel even worse..." His voice was low, and filled with regret.

She sat up. "How is that possible?" she asked, scrunching up her forehead, her cute button nose crinkling as she thought over what he'd just said. She even let out a little laugh. "Thomas, you do think highly of yourself if you think that you can have any effect on my health." She sat up straight and patted her belly. "It is the baby making me feel this way. Not you."

Thomas nodded, also smiling a little. "Right you are. I do have an awful big head sometimes, don't I?"

Mollie had to nod a little, but she smiled reluctantly. "You do have a bit of an ego, Thomas Doherty. But that's part of what I admire about you. Even though I fuss and complain, I do so love the way you take control of things in this town." She reached over and patted his hand. "This place really needs you. And you shouldn't worry about what Kit and Jedediah say, about how they think you're too young."

Thomas reached over and placed his other hand on top of Mollie's. "Sometimes I think they are right." He gazed into Mollie's eyes. "Perhaps I have bitten off more than I can chew. Taken on too many responsibilities at a young age."

Mollie withdrew her hand and sat back, concerned. "You don't mean me and the baby, do you, Thomas?"

"Oh, no..." he reached back for her hand. "No, I never meant

anything like that." He shook his head frantically as he rushed to reassure her. "I meant with this job, as well. Trying to juggle everything..." He glanced down. "I just don't feel as though I'm getting any of it right. Kit and Jedediah are correct. Maybe I ought to quit."

"Oh, no, you can't do that, Thomas." She grabbed his hands and shook her head. "Please. I'd feel so guilty if you quit because of me. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

"But will you be able to cope by yourself?" he asked, glancing down at her pregnant belly. "If I go out and work, when you're in such a state..."

She looked at him firmly. "Women have been in 'such a state' since the dawn of time, Thomas. I am sure I can handle it."

He sat and just stared at her for a moment, searching her eyes. "Are you sure, Mollie? Because it doesn't seem like you are. You were so mad with me today, when I left you..."

"Shh," she said. "I can handle myself. I just need to be a little braver."

"I think you're fine just the way you are, Mollie." Thomas smiled, and let out a long sigh of relief. "But I have to admit I am happy to hear you say these things. There are a lot of changes taking place in White Elk, and I need to be out there, at the front and center of things. We need to expand, modernize. I'm not like Kit and Jedediah, who think this town ought to stand still in time." He stood up and walked over to the basin, reaching for a cup to fill with water. "I'm actually going to need to be away from the house even more in the upcoming months. Maybe even travel a bit to the city." He took a sip of water

before placing the mug down. "As long as that's okay with you, of course."

Mollie sat quietly, wondering if she had said the right thing. Part of her wanted to blurt out, "*I take it all back, I need you to stay here with me more,*" but out loud she said, forcing a smile to her lips, "Of course it is, Thomas."

Still digging her nails into the varnish, she added, "I will be fine."

* * *

A PROMISE IS BROKEN

* * *

White Elk, 1871

"Are you sure you've got everything you need?" Mollie asked, handing Thomas his coat and bag. Her fingers lingered on them as he reached out for the items, and she had to fight the urge to pull them back away from him. She wanted to grab him, pull him to her, beg him not to go. But her face didn't show her feelings. She kept her expression frozen. The perfect picture of a devoted, supporting wife.

Not one that was going out of her mind with worry.

"Yes, now stop fussing," Thomas said, grabbing the bag off her. "You shouldn't be carrying heavy bags like this anyway. Or worrying so much about me. I'll only be gone overnight, remember. I'll be back before lunchtime tomorrow. Not too long for you to have to be on your own."

Mollie nodded and reached a hand behind her back, rubbing the spot where it ached. "I'm being brave now, remember? Just as long as you really will be back when you say you will." She glanced down at her tummy. "It's just...you know, with the baby due to arrive soon."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek, reaching out behind him to open the door. Chilly air blew in, startling Mollie, as he said to her, "You're not having second thoughts about me going, are you?"

"Of course not," she replied quickly. She shook her head, making her curls bounce up and down, then swing around her face. "I'll be

fine by myself in the house, don't you worry about me. Susan and Isabella are both going to check in on me."

"Good," he said, giving her one last hug before he left. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, then."

* * *

Mollie woke up and glanced out the window. Still dark.

Groaning, she turned back over and burrowed her face into the pillow. *"Oh, why can't it be day already? I must have barely slept at all."*

She shut her eyes tight, trying to get back to sleep, but no matter which way she tried to lie, it seemed like her belly got in the way, and she found it impossible to get back to sleep again. Kicking the covers off her, she groggily rubbed her eyes and placed her slippers on before shuffling to the kitchen to boil a pot of tea.

"Ouch," she cried out, in the dark, as a sharp pain hit her stomach. She rubbed her tummy for a second, standing still, trying to figure out if the pain was going to persist.

When no more twinges came after a few moments she went to walk again, grabbing for a pot in the dim light of dawn that was just breaking through the clouds. "Ow!" she cried out, falling forward as the pot went falling to the floor, creating an almighty clanging noise as it landed.

She leaned forward, reaching out to lay her hand on the bench as she kept the other gripped on her stomach. She looked out the window. Only the faintest crack of light. Far too early for Isabella's

office to be open.

She looked around the kitchen helplessly. *"Oh, if only Thomas were here...I could send him to go and get her. Why did he have to leave?"*

And then, the one terrible thought hit her.

"What if he doesn't come back?"

Another pain shot through her, and she almost dropped to her knees from the pain. She brought her head up, trying to take slow, steady breaths, as the pain gradually turned from sharp twinges to a more throbbing ache. She stumbled forward and made her way to a chair, where she sat, waiting for day to break through properly so she could get herself help. *"Please God, let me be well enough to make it to Isabella's before anything bad happens."*

"And please let Thomas return. Bring him back safely to me and this baby."

* * *

"Mollie, what on Earth is it, child?" Isabella asked, racing to get the door open. "Here, come on in," she said, placing one arm around Mollie as she ushered her into the medical practice.

Mollie's lip trembled as she reached an arm out, trying to steady herself as she took a seat. "I just...I don't know what's wrong with me, Isabella."

"First Thomas, then you..." Isabella said, tutting.

"Huh?" Mollie asked, confused. "What do you mean, first

Thomas..?"

"Oh, I just meant he was here to see me a few days ago. Why, didn't he tell you?"

"No," Mollie said, shaking her head. "No, he didn't."

Isabella coughed, and Mollie saw the faint sight of a blushing creeping up her neck above her frilled lace collar, dancing up towards the bottom of her cheeks. "Don't worry about that now," Isabella said. "It was nothing."

Mollie frowned, about to push the subject further, but Isabella cut her off.

"Come on, tell me what's wrong with you, Mollie. That's what's important. I can see that you're in a frightful state this morning. Tell me your symptoms, one by one." Isabella took her coat off and placed it on the hook behind her desk. "Then we'll see if we can't put your mind at ease."

Mollie shook her head, and her big watery eyes threatened to spill over. "That's just it, though, Isabella - I don't know how to describe them. They are different all the time, and hard to define."

Isabella took a seat, her face furrowed in concern. "Try just thinking of one. What's the worst symptom you have?"

"This...pain in my stomach. And chest," Mollie said slowly, narrowing her eyes as she thought. "Sort of like something is constricting me."

Isabella chuckled a little. "Well, you are pregnant, my dear.

There's a person in there, constricting you. Sharing your blood supply, and food, and energy with you."

Mollie looked up. "Oh. Oh, Isabella, is that all it is? Can all of this really be normal? Are you sure there's nothing wrong with my baby?"

"All a completely normal part of being pregnant."

Mollie sat, twiddling her thumbs for a minute, her eyes darting around Isabella's office. It seemed, to her at least, far less modern than the office where she'd first received the news she was pregnant. But she could tell that Isabella and Susan had done their best to decorate it, to make it more homely, with the sprigs of herbs, and branches, and fruits that lay around, and the soft green colored walls. And Isabella herself made the place feel more welcoming, to Mollie, anyway. She looked at Isabella and remembered to be grateful that she had a woman doctor to take care of her this time.

But something still made her uncomfortable. The silence grew between them, as Isabella began to tidy her desk, clearing her throat a little. "Is that all, Mollie?"

"I...I guess so," she said, softly, picking herself up. She was so heavy she almost didn't make it; it was as though she was being pulled back towards the ground. "Er, thanks, Isabella." She smiled and ducked her head, turning to leave.

"I hope I put your mind to rest, my dear."

Mollie paused, her hand on the door handle. "Yes," she said quietly, then quickly looked away before exiting.

But as she left, she had one thought occupying her mind. *"I know there is something wrong. Something Isabella isn't telling me, maybe. Or something she can't see."*

"What if I lose this baby, the way I lost John?"

The terrible thought struck her, and she had to hug her coat close to her as she hurried home, wanting to get out of the cold, wanting the terrible thoughts to leave her skull. She prayed that God would not only take care of her baby, but that he would put her mind to rest. Erase the bad thoughts from her mind, the worries that kept her awake each night.

She reached the house and locked the door behind her, racing for the fire. But even with her coat on, and the thick heat of the flames in front of her, the chill didn't leave her body.

* * *

"Where have you been all day, Thomas? I've been worried sick about you." Mollie paced back and forth, her hand on her stomach, as she shook her head, sending her curls flipping back and forth over her shoulders.

Thomas frowned, taking his hat off and setting it on the table. "I was just out working...I'm not too late home, am I? Just a couple of hours over schedule."

Mollie threw her hands up in the air. "Just a couple of hours? Thomas, try ten hours."

"Mollie, I'm sorry..."

"Well, sorry isn't good enough, Thomas."

She stopped pacing, and turned to look at him, her voice coming out slightly breathless. "I needed you today, Thomas, and you were nowhere to be found."

"Needed me?" His face fell as he took a step towards her. "What happened?" He glanced down at the bulge beneath her dress. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

She shook her head, then nodded. "No...well, yes. I don't know!" She threw her hands up again. "I just don't know, Thomas, and that is half the trouble, you see. I think sometimes I am going mad."

"Shh, calm down," he said, pulling out a chair for her. "Sit down and tell me what happened." He turned and poured her a glass of water. "Were you feeling ill?"

She shrugged. "Just...off. Feeling really strange all day. I don't know how to explain it." She turned her face up to Thomas. "I tried to find you, Thomas, I needed you here with me."

"Shh." He reached out for her hand. "I'm here now."

She looked down. "Well, it's too late now."

"Come on," he said, chuckling a little. "You're just sulking. It's not too late. Tell me what happened."

"I went to see Isabella."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Was it that serious?"

"Yes. No." She sighed. "I don't know. I thought it was. Now I think maybe I was just being silly."

Thomas pushed the glass of water out of the way and reached over so that both his hands were gripping Mollie's. "What did Isabella have to say."

"Just that. Pretty much. She said the symptoms I was having are just a normal part of being pregnant."

"See?" Thomas said, bowing down so that he could look into her eyes, but she was still being childish, sulking a little, and refusing to quite meet his gaze. "Mollie...what is it? Did something else happen?"

"Nothing happened, exactly..." She let out a long sigh. "I suppose I was just being silly," she added, quietly. "I guess there's nothing wrong. I mean, Isabella is a doctor, isn't she? So she must know what she is talking about." She glanced up, checking out of the corner of her eye to see if Thomas had any reaction to her talk about Isabella.

"Well, I don't know if she always knows what she's talking about..." he said, drifting off. "Maybe sometimes she can be wrong." He sighed. "I hope she can be wrong."

Mollie sat up straight. "What do you mean by that, Thomas? Are you saying that you don't trust Isabella, as a doctor?"

"I didn't say that."

Mollie thought for a second. "So would you ever go to see her yourself?"

She sat and waited for Thomas's response, watching his face

carefully for the slightest reaction. "I...er," he coughed, pulling at his collar a little. "If there was something really wrong with me I would."

Mollie leaned back in her chair. "And is there something really wrong with you?"

He looked up, a quizzical look in his eye, his head titled to the side just slightly. "Of course not. Why do you ask that?"

She dropped her head. "Nothing."

Thomas furrowed his brow. He reached over and brushed a curl out of Mollie's eyes. "Mollie, if you feel like something is wrong with you, or heaven forbid, the baby, then you need to trust yourself. Just because Isabella said you were being silly, doesn't mean you are. If you say something is wrong, then I believe you."

Mollie looked at her husband. Smiling, she said quietly, "Thank you, Thomas. That means a lot to me." She felt her heartbeat settle again.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for you today, Mollie," he said, brushing a strand of curls behind her ear. "I promise I will be in the future."

"It's okay..." she said, "I know you were working, trying to provide for us all. I'm sorry I got so angry about it earlier. Sometimes I don't feel like I'm quite being myself these days..."

"Hey, don't worry about it." He clasped her hands in his and bent down to give them a kiss. "You're worried about the baby. That's only normal."

"But there was no sense getting mad at you. Or rushing off to see

Isabella," Mollie said, clucking her tongue as she thought back to what a panic she'd been in that morning. "When nothing was even wrong with me. Oh Thomas, you must think that you've married such a silly girl."

He shook his head. "No, I think I've married a wonderful woman, one that worries about her family, and wants them all to be safe. You don't need to worry anymore, Mollie. I will be here for you, and this child, from now on. No more travelling. I should never have left you overnight like I did. I won't do it again."

She nodded. "Thank you, Thomas."

* * *

A DECISION MADE IN HASTE

* * *

White Elk 1871

Mollie smiled and pulled the door back, welcoming Susan inside. "Come in, I will make you a cup of tea."

As they settled beside each other on the sofa, Susan admired Mollie's house. "Wow, you've sure got a beautiful place here, Mollie."

She nodded, not quite listening to what Susan was saying. "Yes...Thomas works hard for all of it. He's away so often, always arranging some business or another..."

"Mollie, what's wrong?" Susan asked. "You seem very far away today. You're not having your pains again, are you? We've all been so worried..."

Mollie shook her head and placed her tea cup down. "No, it's not me this time."

"Is it the baby?" Susan asked, still concerned.

"No, no, nothing like that." Mollie sat back and rested her head against the back of the sofa. "It's Thomas, actually. I think there might be something wrong with him, Susan. Something he won't tell me about. I think he is keeping something secret."

"Why do you say that?"

She sighed. "Please don't think badly of Isabella if I tell you this."

"Of course not. I never could."

But Mollie still hesitated to tell what happened. Isabella had been so kind to her, and she didn't want Susan to think of her as a gossip. "She accidentally let slip that Thomas had been to see her. Please don't think her unprofessional, Susan. She'd simply assumed Thomas had told me about the visit."

"Which he hadn't?"

"No." Mollie gazed down at the hem of her dress, picking at the material with her fingernails. "No, he hadn't."

"Maybe he just doesn't want to trouble you, with everything else you've got to worry about," Susan tried to reassure her. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Mollie picked herself up and forced a smile to her face. "You're probably right. I'm sure it's nothing."

* * *

Thomas clutched the reins of his horse, pulling back tightly so that the horse came to a rearing stop at the pine clearing. Thomas jumped off and raced over to Kit and Jedediah.

"Great news, men!" he said, as the other two looked up. He could have sworn he saw them each throw a look at the other, as if to say *"What does he want now?"* but Thomas was so happy that he ignored it.

Jedediah straightened up, chewing on a blade of grass. He placed his axe on the ground and leaned against it. "Well, don't keep us in suspense, man."

"I'm to travel to the city for a few days, to talk with some man

about expanding White Elk to become a proper town. Maybe even a city one day," he said, with a glint in his eyes. "If I can get the suppliers, we'll be able to build a whole new row of houses up this way, as well as some shops, which I'm sure the ladies will appreciate..."

"Hey now," Kit cut in, putting a hand up as Jedediah scowled besides him. "We don't need none of that stuff, Thomas. We're fine just the way we are."

"We are not," Thomas said, indignant. "Maybe it's fine out here for an old man like you, Kit. But I'm a young man with a baby on the way, and I'd like to see this town thriving. Modern, even. Though that word is like a curse word to you."

Kit scowled at him and turned away, and Thomas immediately regretted his choice of words. "Forgive me, Kit, I'm just excited."

"Well, who's gonna look after Mollie while you're gone?" he asked, glancing back at Thomas over his shoulder. "I suppose you got so far ahead of yourself that you never thought of that. As per usual. She won't be able to travel with you, not in her condition."

"Yes, you're right..." Thomas murmured, scratching his head. "I hadn't thought of that." He reached a hand out to pat his horse, who was getting restless, neighing, eager to go. "Ah, but she'll be fine for a day or two, no doubt. I'm sure she won't mind!"

He jumped back on his horse, wary as he went that Kit and Jedediah exchanged that same knowing glance between them.

"You promised you would be here from now on! How can you just take off like this?" Mollie slammed the pot down on the stove so that water tipped over the edge and onto the open flame below, causing it to sizzle.

"Mollie, it's just a very short trip. I won't be away for very long. I'll be back home before you know it."

"Back home before you know it." Mollie felt a ringing in her ears as the words caused a sort of echo in her head. She felt like she had heard those words before.

She shook her head, trying to stop the ringing.

"Back home before you know it."

Thomas came around to her, tried to lay a hand on her back, but she shrugged him off of her.

"I should have known better than to trust your words, Thomas! Your actions tell me everything I need to know." She stopped dead in her tracks and put both hands on her waist. "They tell me you are not ready for a family! You are not ready for the responsibilities of being a father."

"Mollie, you need to calm down, it is not good for the baby..." he tried to say, but she was already stomping back and forth again.

"My family was right..." she muttered, turning her back, but not caring if Thomas heard what she was saying.

"What does that mean?" he took a step closer to her. "What do you mean, your family was right?"

She spun to look at him. "They said I should never come here! That it was a terrible, haunted place, with men who didn't care about anyone but themselves!"

Thomas took a step backwards. "That is a little harsh, Mollie."

"It's true though. Don't try to tell me otherwise. The only thing you care about is yourself, Thomas! You care nothing about me or my baby!"

"Our baby," Thomas said, shaking his head. "This is our baby, Mollie, not just yours. Now, please, sit down so you don't do anything to harm it."

Her eyes shot wide open. "Oh, don't you dare accuse me of not caring, of trying to harm this baby. You're the one who is bringing harm to this family, Thomas, not me!"

"Will you please sit down!"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not sitting down." Her voice came out ragged, and her chest heaved up and down; sweat broken out on her forehead despite the fact that it was ten degrees outside. "In fact, I'm not staying here at all."

"What does that mean?"

Mollie turned on her heel and began to stomp out of the room. "I'm doing as my family told me to all along. I'm going back to live with them, so they can look after me."

Thomas's jaw dropped open as he ran after her, grabbing her by the arm before she could leave the room. "Mollie, don't be ridiculous!

You are going to give birth any day now, you can't travel in this state...it is dangerous to both you and the baby."

She pulled her arm free. "I will be back home before the baby arrives," she said firmly, walking to the bedroom, where she began to pull her belongings out of the drawers. "Then things will be much better. I'll be back with my real family. The people who actually know how to look after me."

Thomas pulled back, stung by her words. "Mollie..." he said. "Please tell me you don't mean these things." His voice was low, filled with sorrow. "Please don't say that I can't look after you. That this isn't your real family. We took those vows in front of God..."

She spun around to look at him. "I'd already said those words once before," she spat. "To John."

There was silence, a dead, heavy emptiness in the air, as soon as those words hit them.

Thomas swallowed. "So that's what this is all about," he said quietly, bowing his head. "I will never be as good as him. You can never love me as much as you loved him, can you?"

He looked up at her, hoping to see something in her face that would tell him he was wrong, but her face was still, and she said nothing to put his mind at ease.

"I see," he said, backing out of the room. "If you need to go, Mollie, I can't stop you."

"Mollie, where on Earth are you going, dear?" Susan called, running out into the street after her, the cool wind hitting her face as she ran, the sharpness of it entering her lungs, almost winding her. "What are you lugging that bag along behind you for?" She ran until she caught up to the younger girl. "Mollie, please stop."

Mollie dropped the bag and leaned forward, breathless. "Susan..." she gasped, as Susan ran to her side.

"My goodness, you need to sit down."

She guided her to a log by the side of the road, as Mollie collapsed on top of it. "Mollie, please tell me, what is going on? Why are you out here, in the freezing cold, dragging your luggage?"

She struggled to get the words out through her ragged breath. "I'm leaving...Susan...I'm going back home."

Susan's jaw dropped open. "Going home? You're kidding me, aren't you? Whatever for?"

Mollie shook her head and big, fat tears fell out of her eyes. "I can't stay here anymore, Susan...I can't...it's all..." The sobs took over and she could no longer speak. Susan leaned over and wrapped an arm around her, as Mollie buried herself into her friend's chest.

Susan waited till the sobs had subsided before she spoke. "Mollie," she said, gently. "You know you can't travel back home when you're about to have the baby. What if it arrives while you're travelling?"

Mollie's sobs started up again, harder this time. "Oh, Susan, I know. I do know..." Her chest heaved as she reached up to wipe away

her tears with the back of her hand. "But I can't go back to the house now. Oh Susan, I can't possibly face Thomas after what I said to him. I'm sure he'll never want to see me ever again! Oh, I've really ruined things now..." She began to sob again as Susan gently patted her on the back.

"I'm sure you haven't. Thomas is a very forgiving man. He lives by God's word, Mollie, and he has vowed to love and protect you no matter what happens. I'm sure nothing has happened that is so broken it can't be fixed."

Mollie sat up and wiped at her eyes with a hanky, till it was soaking wet. "Susan, I told him that he wasn't my real family. That..." she trailed off, not wanting to relive the things she'd said. "I said a terrible thing to him. Let him believe a terrible thing."

"Mollie, Thomas will understand. If you only spoke in anger, or out of fear, he will forgive you for what you said."

She shook her head. "No, he won't. He didn't even stop me from leaving. He is going to let me go, he's not even here...I know, Susan, without a shadow of a doubt, that he never wants to speak to me ever again. How could he ever look past what I've done..."

Susan tapped her on the shoulder, and pointed down the road. "Mollie, look."

Mollie pulled her head up and looked down the road through red, bleary eyes. "Thomas..." she murmured, standing up. Her legs wobbled underneath her, and she reached out for something to steady her. Susan grabbed her hand.

"It's okay," she whispered. "You're going to be fine now. Go to him."

Mollie nodded, tears still in her eyes, but a smile now spreading on her lips as she walked towards Thomas.

"Mollie..." he said, running to meet her. "Stay there, don't move."

Susan bowed her head and slunk away, as Thomas wrapped his arm around his wife. "Mollie...I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of it." His face was buried into her neck, as he squeezed her gently. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, and that I didn't stop you from leaving..."

"Shh, you're here now," she said, squeezing her eyes shut. "Thomas, I'm so sorry for what I said. For what I made you believe."

Thomas pulled back and gazed down at her full, pretty face. "Mollie, please let's not worry about that anymore.."

"But..." she said, her eyes still heavy with tears. "How can you forgive me, Thomas? For saying that you aren't my family..." She stopped and looked away from him, down at the ground.

He grabbed her face between his hands. "Mollie, just tell me you didn't mean any of it, and we'll move on. Please..."

"I didn't mean it, Thomas," she whispered, looking up, searching his eyes. "I promise I didn't mean it. I should never have made you feel that way. It was wrong of me, when you've been so kind and loving to me. I want to stay here, with you. I was so foolish to throw a tantrum like that, to just leave."

He hugged her tight. "I know you were just acting out of emotion,

my love. It's all okay."

As he pressed her to him and Mollie took him in, felt his heartbeat beat against hers, she prayed, thanking God that He had sent Thomas back to her, that all was forgiven. And she promised, vowed, to never act so foolishly again.

"Come on, Mollie, let's go home now."

* * *

"Mollie, are you okay?"

"Shh," she said, swinging her feet over the side of the bed. "I'm fine, don't worry. Just getting a drink of milk. You go back to sleep."

Thomas said something but it was muffled by the pillow, and Mollie slipped out, walking to the sitting room where she sat down quietly and pulled out her journal, flicking through the pages till the photo fell out.

She bent over and picked it up, her actions painstakingly slow, as she was careful not to make a sound lest Thomas come in and catch her.

She reached over and lit a candle, then put it carefully out of the way of the door, so that the flickering light wouldn't reach the hallway.

Underneath the candlelight, she looked over the photo of John.

"I'll be back home before you know it." Those were the words he had said to her right before he'd left to fight.

But he hadn't come back.

She ran a thumb over the photo, tracing the outline of John's face.

"Please God, forgive me," she prayed.

* * *

A BUNDLE OF JOY ARRIVES

* * *

White Elk 1871
Two Weeks Later.

"Thomas," she said, breathlessly. "I think the baby's coming. Run, you need to get Isabella right away!"

Clamoring for his hat, Thomas raced towards the door. "I'll go as fast as these legs will take me! Hold tight, Mollie, I'll be back with help shortly!"

* * *

Isabella walked out of the room, a grin as wide as the great White Elk lake spreading across her face. "It's a baby girl, Thomas."

He let out a burst of joy, bringing his hands up to cover his mouth. "A girl?"

Isabella nodded. "Congratulations. She's beautiful."

"And she's well, is she?" Thomas whispered. "With all the problems Mollie had during the pregnancy, I was awful worried that the baby might be born ill or something...We both were."

Isabella shook her head. "She's absolutely perfect. No signs of illness."

"And Mollie?"

"Mollie is exhausted, but fine."

Thomas reached his hands together and looked towards the sky.
"Oh, thank you, God."

Isabella reached out and placed a hand on Thomas' arm. "He really has blessed you today, Thomas. With a beautiful daughter."

"He has," Thomas said, his eyes sparkling with tears. "Can I go in and see them?"

"Mollie is resting up. But I'll bring the baby out for you now, before I go back to tend to my final business with Mollie."

After a moment or two, Isabella returned with a tiny bundle of limbs, wrapped tightly in a woolen blanket. Thomas gazed down at the bundle with joy, admiring her tiny hands and feet, and pink, rosy cheeks that reminded him so much of Mollie. "She's got her eyes squeezed shut..." Thomas said. "What color are they?"

Isabella reached over and placed the bundle in his arms. "Sometimes baby's eyes change color, in the first few weeks," she said gently. "But they do look to me like they are going to be green." She looked up at Thomas's face, seeing how proud he was as he cradled the newborn. "Congratulations, Thomas. You're going to make a fine father."

He gazed down at the tiny creature, his heart swelling, feeling as though it might burst, he felt so much love for the child.

"And, Thomas?" Isabella added.

"Yes?" He still didn't bring his eyes up; they were transfixed by the child in his arms.

"Mollie wants you to choose the name."

"Charlotte," he said. "Her name is Charlotte."

* * *

With some relief, Mollie lay back and glanced up at Isabella. "I really did it..." she sighed, closing her eyes. "It's all over, at long last."

Isabella was unable to control the laugh that escaped from her lips. "I'm afraid the hard work is only just beginning, Mollie."

Mollie's eyes sprang open. "Why, whatever do you mean? Surely the worst part is over?"

Isabella gazed down at her with a very strange expression on her face. "Now you've got a baby to look after, my child. That's going to be the hardest work there is."

Mollie smiled, waving a hand. "Oh, that will be the easy part. She is going to be so easy to love, our little Charlotte. Oh, Isabella, I know I shall never work a day in my life now. The rest is going to be very easy."

Isabella smiled and reached down to wipe Mollie's brow, fixing the pillow underneath her so that it was plump and full. "You're going to make a great mother, Mollie. And Thomas is going to make a wonderful father. And I'm sure that it will be easy at times, with all the love you've got to share now. Love will make it feel like easy work at some times, and hard work at others."

Mollie nodded. "I know," she said softly, looking down at her hands. "I'm not so naive. I know what terrible times myself and Annie

gave my mother when we were small girls. But..." she looked up. "If I'm being totally honest, Isabella, and maybe it sounds awful to say it, I'm just relieved the pregnancy is over with. I was so tired of feeling so ill, and worried about what was wrong. Worried that something was wrong with the baby. That I might lose her. When I say the hard part is over, that's what I mean. I'm just so happy Charlotte is here now, and Thomas and I can start our real lives as a family."

Isabella smiled. "I'm so happy for you, Mollie." She gave the girl one last pat, before checking she was comfortable enough to be left. "I'll be back in the morning, Mollie. Please send Thomas for me if anything should happen before then."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Mollie said, before adding, "and thank you, Isabella. For everything."

"It's all part of the job, my dear."

"Isabella," she called, before she could leave. "We want you to be Charlotte's Godmother. And Kit, her Godfather."

Isabella blushed a deep crimson before bowing her head and answering quietly, "I would be honored."

* * *

AN ACCIDENT DISCOVERY

* * *

White Elk 1871
Three Weeks Later.

"She's so beautiful, isn't she?" Mollie said, leaning over Charlotte's crib, reaching a finger into the cot for Charlotte to grab. She reached up with her chubby hands and gripped the finger, letting out a little gurgle as she went.

Mollie smiled down. "I'm glad she's a happy baby. Barely giving us any trouble."

"Now that she's actually out in the world," Thomas pointed out. "She gave you an awful lot of trouble while you were carrying her."

Mollie reached an hand around Thomas. "That's true. Oh well, that's all forgotten now." She kept her other hand in the crib, as Charlotte brought her hands up to her mouth and started to chew on Mollie's finger.

"Oi!" Mollie called out, but she giggled. "Hey, that hurt." She laughed and looked at Thomas. "Maybe I spoke too soon. Maybe she is going to be a little troublemaker after all."

As Charlotte continued to gnaw on her mother's finger, Mollie gazed down. "I'm so glad her eyes have stayed green, Thomas. Just like yours," she whispered, leaning in close to her husband.

"Mollie," he said, quietly. "Do you really consider Charlotte to be my daughter?"

She looked up, startled. "Of course I do, Thomas. Why-ever do you ask that?"

"I'm just checking," he said softly, giving her a squeeze. "I didn't mean to alarm you. I'm so grateful to have you and Charlotte in my life, so happy that God blessed me with the two of you. I just want to make sure that you feel the same way."

She pulled her hand away from Charlotte's claw-like grip and wrapped her other arm around Thomas. "You don't even need to ask that," she said, placing her head against his chest. "Of course I feel the same way. I feel so glad that God led me to you as well..."

Thomas stood still for a second. He seemed to hesitate. "But you can't be grateful about the circumstances. Not really." He pulled her back, and turned her face to look up at him, her golden-brown curls spilling around her face. "Mollie, surely you would have things differently, if you could."

Mollie searched his face, as she struggled to answer him. "Thomas..."

He hung his head. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to upset you."

She swallowed. "I just... It's very difficult for me to talk about these things."

"I know it is. I'm sorry. Let's change the subject."

"But Thomas," she cut in, her voice firm. "It's not up for me to decide God's plan for us, or to pass judgement on His decisions. If he had guided me to you, then it must be for a reason. Please Thomas,

don't say that I would have decided to have it another way, because..." she had to stop speaking as her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Of course what happened, was terrible, and to ask if I would change it, well, it's not fair."

She pulled away and brought a hand up to her mouth, trying to cover her face, hide her tears, but her hand was shaking. Thomas reached over and took her trembling hand in his. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Thomas," she said, looking up. "No matter what. No matter what happened - and I can't do anything to change it - I want you to know that I am happy to be here with you. And I am overjoyed that you are going to be Charlotte's papa. Please believe me when I say that."

He nodded, and tried to pull Mollie in for another embrace, but she suddenly took a sharp breath. "Oww," she said.

She leaned over, clutching at her chest.

"Mollie, what is it?"

She shook her head, squeezing her face tight, as she struggled for breath. "I...I don't know."

"Come on," Thomas said, putting her arm around his shoulder. "I'm putting you straight to bed. I'll send for Isabella right away."

Thomas ran into the practice, then entered Isabella's office without even knocking on the door.

"Thomas?" she said in a start, standing up. She looked him up and down. "What's happened, are you feeling ill?"

He shook his head. Winded from the run, he heaved as he struggled to explain what had happened. "It's Mollie, she's having those chest and stomach pains again."

"What?" Isabella said, shaking her head. "Are you sure, Thomas? Those were all symptoms of the pregnancy...they will be gone now."

"No, they ain't gone," he said, still wheezing as he spoke. "Please, you gotta come quick, I'm so worried about her."

She nodded, grabbing her coat and bag with all her medical supplies as they hurried back to the house, each shielding themselves from the cold rain and wind that flew at their faces as they went.

"Quick, she's in here," Thomas said, holding the door open for Isabella, as he showed her into the bedroom.

There was a sudden loud squealing, then the sound of a baby wailing, as Isabella raced to Mollie's side. "It's Charlotte," Thomas cried, looking first at Mollie laying in the bed, then towards the door as the baby's wails came through the wall. "Okay, I better tend to her. Isabella, please check over Mollie, make sure she's okay."

Isabella nodded and waved him away.

"Mollie, where are you feeling pain?" Isabella took a seat next to Mollie and cast an eye over the young girl.

"The same place as before. How can that be possible though? Unless there is another baby in there."

Isabella took out her stethoscope and placed it around her neck, before putting each of the earpieces in. She sat besides Mollie and put

the cold end of the instrument up to Mollie's chest.

"Oh, Isabella..." she wailed. "Why hasn't it gone away? I should be better by now. The baby has been born, and I am still getting these terrible pains." She lowered her voice. "Oh, Isabella, I'm so terribly worried."

Isabella brought the stethoscope away. "Mollie," she said slowly. "I'm starting to wonder if that might be the problem."

She looked at her, her face scrunched up. "What might be the problem?"

Isabella placed her hands in her laps, sitting up straight to deliver her verdict. "All your worrying, Mollie. I think it is your anxiety causing the pains."

Mollie frowned again. "Isabella, are you saying I am making it all up? That I am going mad?"

Isabella shook her head. "No, not making it up, my dear. But I think, all this time, it wasn't actually the baby causing you pain."

"Then what was it?"

"Mollie, let me think how to explain this to you. Actually, you tell me, my dear. When do you get the pains?"

Mollie shrugged. "Any time of the day, or night. They seem to strike me down at any time."

"No," Isabella said gently. "I don't mean what time day. Is there any event that seems to bring them on?"

"Event?" Mollie looked confused. "No. It doesn't seem to matter what I eat, or drink, or whether I am doing physical activity or resting. Isabella, that's what scares me the most about the pain. That nothing I do seems to stop, or help it. Isabella, I'm so scared that..." her voice trailed off, and she could barely get the next words out. "I'm so scared that I might be dying."

She turned away, too ashamed to see Isabella's face, too worried that she was being silly, overly dramatic, and that Isabella would laugh at her. But Isabella didn't laugh. She sat in a deep, heavy silence. "Mollie, why are you so afraid of that?" she finally asked.

Mollie kept her head turned towards the window. "Because I know what death is now, Isabella. I know that someone can be there one day, and gone out of your life forever the next. That no matter what promises you make, they don't mean anything. God can decide to take anyone, when He wants to."

"Oh, Mollie..."

"And if something happens to me, Charlotte will lose another parent." She dropped her head away from the window and looked down at her hands, where her fingernails were digging into the blanket.

* * *

With Charlotte finally settled, Thomas put her down to sleep and wandered around the house at a loose end while Isabella saw to Mollie. He started to walk towards the bedroom, then stopped. "*No, I'd best leave them to it. It might be private business they don't want me knowing about.*" He thought back to his own private visit to Isabella all

those months ago, when his worst fears had been realized.

When she'd told him that, due to his injuries in the war, he would never be able to have children of his own.

He shook his head, trying to get those thoughts out of his mind. He backed away from the bedroom, trying to find something to distract himself with. He went into the sitting room and sat down, intending to smoke his pipe and read the paper, but there was a hard-covered book, like a journal or something, that he hadn't seen before, so he grabbed it curiously and flicked through the pages.

The photograph of John spilled out and fluttered to the floor.

Thomas reached down and picked it up, the black-and-white portrait of the fallen soldier staring up at him.

"Oh, Mollie..." Thomas dropped down into the chair, his head falling into his hands. The photograph fell to the floor below. "Even after all this time, still hanging onto him..." He kept his head cradled in his hands, the photograph visible between the cracks in his fingers.

He shook his head as he looked down at the photo of the young man, proud in his soldier's uniform, his mouth in a firm, straight line. *"He's so young,"* Thomas thought. *"Not much older than I am..."*

His heart ached as he thought about Mollie keeping this photo in her things, about what it meant. As he struggled over his emotions, he wasn't sure what made him the saddest. That Mollie kept the photo, or that she kept it in secret. Looked at it in secret. Keeping her pain so close to her like that. Unable to share it with him.

"She must not trust me at all..." he thought, sorrowfully. "If she can't tell me that she still keeps this photo, hidden away. I'm not a monster that wouldn't allow it, or get mad at her, if she wanted to keep the photo out in the open. Why does she feel the need to keep this from me?"

He kicked at the photo with his feet.

"Why does she still keep this photo, anyway?" he wondered. "She must still think of John as her 'real' husband. She hasn't moved on. She doesn't accept me as her family, I can see that now."

He heard Charlotte crying again. After keeping his head in his hands for a few moments, he got up and walked out of the room, over towards her, glancing into her crib. "My sweet girl..." he said, looking down at her. He reached a hand down and Charlotte reached her hand out, wrapping her tiny little finger around just one of his.

"Sweet child...you don't know any different, do you?"

Charlotte stared up at him, eyes open wide, her cries subsided now she had Thomas's hand clasped in hers.

"You think that I'm your papa, don't you..." he said, sadly, thinking about that photo, still lying in the other room. "And so do I, sweet one. And I would do anything to protect you. But Mollie...she doesn't think that I'm your real papa. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Is everything okay?" a voice called out behind him, and Thomas spun round to see Mollie standing there. She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, explaining that Isabella had left, and that everything was fine.

"Yeah, er, Charlotte's just been crying," he said quickly, turning back to the crib before Mollie could see his face. "*Did she hear what I said?*" he wondered, glancing first at the baby, then at Mollie.

But she just laughed as she reached her hand into the crib. "She's so cute, isn't she?" Mollie asked with a grin. "Thomas, we are so lucky. The three of us."

"Yes," Thomas said quietly. "Yes we are."

* * *

DANGER PRESENTS ITSELF

* * *

White Elk 1871.

The following morning Thomas got up early, intent on tidying up the mess he'd made the night before. He reached down and picked up the photo of John, turning it over before he could see the man's face, and quietly put it back between the pages of the book.

He straightened himself up and looked in the mirror, able only to make out his reflection faintly in the pale early morning light that was coming in through the windows. *"Well, if Mollie doesn't think that I can take John's place, be as good a husband and father as he could have been, then I will just have to prove otherwise."*

He made a firm decision as he looked at his reflection, his flaxen hair brushed back neatly under his hat, his expensive, sharp waistcoat peaking out from underneath his heavy coat. He would travel after all. Give him some time to clear his head, to figure out what Mollie meant by keeping that photo hidden. *"It's the best way to make more money,"* he decided. *"The best way to prove to both of them that I am the man that they need me to be."*

He took a step back, making sure that the photo was hidden away properly in the pages of the book before he left.

* * *

"Are you working today?" Mollie asked, taking in Thomas' fine outfit, a crimson suit with a sharp waistcoat and pocket square. She held a crying Charlotte in one arm and a baby bottle in the other; she

sat down so that she could try to comfort Charlotte.

"Yes," he said plainly. "I won't be gone too long."

Mollie looked him up and down. "That's an awful smart suit, Thomas. It looks as though you might be going to the city in that thing."

He shook his head faintly. "Not going too far." He kept his eyes down, not making eye contact with her.

"Thomas, please tell me if you are going somewhere. I'll worry otherwise."

"It's nothing to worry about," he said, thinking that the very reason he wasn't telling Mollie was so that she wouldn't worry. He wanted to travel to the city, not to deceive her, but as a way to prove to her that he could be the right man for her. The man she needed. The man that Charlotte needed. He took one last sip of his tea then placed the cup down.

As he finished buttoning up his jacket, Mollie startled beside him. She reached out and grabbed his arm.

"What was that noise?"

"What noise?" Thomas looked round, listening for a moment. "I can't hear anything."

Mollie shook her head and put a finger to her lips. "There was a growling noise. I'm sure I heard it. Just listen."

Thomas stopped buttoning his coat for a moment, stood still, and

listened.

"Mollie, I can't hear anything. I'm sure it's nothing. You're probably just imagining things."

"Thomas." Mollie was cradling the baby in her arms, bopping her up and down to try to get her to settle and go to sleep. "Be honest with me, please." She reached out and grabbed his arm. "Is there any danger to us? I could have sworn I heard a growling noise. I know I did..."

"Mollie, how could you have heard anything with Charlotte crying like that? I really do think it's just in your head..."

"It's not. You know there are bears in the woods, Thomas. All kinds of creatures. You know what those sounds are in the woods, better than anyone. You're the one who's up there all the time."

"I try to avoid the place as much as I can, actually," he said, grabbing his hat and coat. "It's more the place for the likes of Kit and Jedediah, not me."

Mollie stopped bopping up and down for a second, though she still kept one arm gently rubbing Charlotte's back. "So you do admit that you avoid going to the woods?"

"Well, not avoid..."

"There must be a reason for that. Tell me, Thomas, if there is something dangerous I should be worried about." She glanced down at Charlotte. "You would tell me if there were bears close by, wouldn't you?"

"I've told you before, they won't dare come into town. They won't come anywhere near us."

Mollie hugged Charlotte even tighter, feeling the tiny, vulnerable child in her arms. "And they won't come anywhere near Charlotte, will they?" She looked down at Charlotte, who had just about worn herself out with all her crying, and was beginning to get the hiccups.

Thomas shook his head. "No, of course not. They aren't going to come anywhere near you and Charlotte. Do you really think I'd leave you all alone, go out to work, if I thought you were in any danger?"

Mollie stopped. "I...I suppose not."

He frowned and sighed. "You don't sound too sure. Don't you trust me, Mollie?" He shook his head. "I thought we were past all this. You do trust me to take care of you and Charlotte, don't you?"

He walked towards them and placed a gentle hand on the top of Charlotte's head. "Charlotte is my child. And you are my wife. I would never let anything happen to either of you."

"I just wish you would stay here," Mollie whispered. "I don't feel safe. Why do you need to go off to work all the time, even when it's not necessary?"

Thomas pulled back a little, staring at Mollie and shaking his head gently. "So, we're not past this then. You don't trust me."

Mollie swallowed and looked up him. "Of course I do, Thomas. Just, please, promise me you wouldn't go and leave us if you thought we were in any real danger."

Thomas stood still, staring at Mollie, and then the baby. "Of course I wouldn't." He walked over and gave them both a kiss. "Now, I really need to get going."

* * *

Another roaring sound came through the walls, and Mollie drew the curtains closed, as if keeping out the daylight and darkening the room could do anything to keep out a wild creature.

In her arms, Charlotte began to cry. "There there, little one," she cooed, patting Charlotte on the back as she bounced her up and down. "It's all alright. Nothing is going to hurt us." But she could feel her arms trembling beneath Charlotte as she spoke, and, almost worried she might drop her, she put the baby down in her crib and went back to the window, pulling back the curtain to peek out.

She only dared to pull the curtain back a crack, and she held her breath as she peered out, half expecting to see a giant brown bear staring her right in the face.

"We need your papa here," Mollie said, turning around and facing the crib. "How could he have just gone and left us like this? Does he care about us at all?"

She turned back to the window and craned her neck out this time, to get a close look at the the road directly in front of the house that led to the pine forest. The noise was gone now, and as she glanced out she could see nothing at the front of the house.

Nothing at all.

Behind her in the crib, Charlotte had gone quiet. Mollie turned around to make sure everything was alright, but Charlotte was peacefully sucking her thumb, her feet curled up as she waved her limbs, staring up at the ceiling like she didn't have a care in the world.

Mollie started to breath again. *"Perhaps Thomas was right. There really is nothing to be afraid of. It's probably all in my head, like usual."*

She walked over to the crib and picked Charlotte up again, cradling her in her arms. "Shh," she said, although Charlotte was no longer crying. "It's all going to be alright."

Mollie took a few deep breaths. "How about we go outside for some fresh air, hey? Just you and me." She bounced Charlotte up and down, then with her other hand reached for her coat and juggled Charlotte while she pulled it on. She rigged Charlotte up tight in a blanket, before placing a woolen hat on her head, then walked towards the back door.

"There, see? There's nothing to be afraid of..."

"There there..." she repeated, still patting Charlotte's back, as a stillness descended over them. All Mollie could hear was silence, apart from the rustling of the pine trees, and a very faint wind blowing against her cheek.

Suddenly, a sound behind her stopped her in her tracks. There was the patter of footsteps, then a snarling noise, followed by a snort.

"Please God..." she said, gulping, as she turned around as slowly as she could, keeping Charlotte clutched to her chest.

She let out a silent gasp as she saw the creature in front of her. A wolf, with steel grey coat, steely, and focused straight on her and the child she was holding.

Mollie took in a sharp breath. Clutching Charlotte in her arms, she took a step back. The wolf gazed up at her with cold blue eyes. It bared its teeth at her and switched its gaze directly to Charlotte.

She could feel her own heartbeat beating straight into Charlotte's, and worried that even though she had the baby's face away from the danger, that she would still be able to sense that something was wrong.

"It's okay...it's okay..." she whispered. Charlotte's crying had completely stopped, which worried Mollie more than if she'd still been wailing.

In front of them the wolf just stood, staring at the mother and baby.

"Good boy..." Mollie said, trying not to show she was scared. But she knew she hadn't tricked Charlotte, and she wasn't tricking the wolf.

As she felt the baby in her arms, instinct kicked in, and she knew she had to do whatever it took to keep her safe. She gripped Charlotte as tight to her chest as she could and turned, sprinting back to the house, her legs moving so fast that her dress almost ripped apart at the seams. She never thought she could run that fast - it was as though God gave her the power to move that quickly as she sprinted towards the back door and pulled it shut behind her.

"Shh," she said, placing Charlotte down in her crib. Mollie's heart was thudding as she thought what to do next. Outside, she could hear the wolf's footsteps in the dead leaves, an awful crinkling noise that made shots of terror run through her. There was another growl, and then Mollie heard the thud of the animal's head against the back door.

She jumped at the sound, reaching into the crib, trying to reassure Charlotte that it was okay. "Shh, don't worry baby girl. Mama will be back in just a few minutes. You just stay there, safe."

She crept over to the door, gingerly reaching a hand towards it. She jumped when she heard a growling noise, and the snarling of the dog's breath.

"Get away!" she yelled. "Get!"

She kicked against the door, trying to scare the wolf away. There was silence for a moment, and Mollie took a step back, wondering if she'd frightened the dog off. But it lunged towards the door again, growling. She shot a look over her shoulder at the crib, where Charlotte was laying peacefully, still remaining uncannily silent.

There was only one thought racing through her head: *"I have to protect Charlotte."*

She turned back to the back door, triple checking that it was locked before she took off, passing Charlotte as she went. "Mama will be back in a moment. Just stay there. It's all going to be alright."

She walked out the front door and closed it quietly, before creeping quietly around the side of the house. Her only plan was to keep the wolf away from Charlotte, to keep her baby safe.

"It doesn't matter what happens to me," she thought. "As long as Charlotte is safe."

As she walked down the yard towards the back of the house, she looked in through the window to see Charlotte laying safe in her crib. *"God, please protect her,"* she said, as she kept walking.

She brought a hand up to her chest, and noticed, for the first time, that her breathing was steady, that the familiar tightness in her chest was gone.

"It's up to you, God," she thought, putting her trust in His hands. *"All this time I've been so scared of dying, of something going wrong..."* she stopped.

"I've been so scared that Thomas is going to leave. Leave us. Like John did," she realized, stopping dead in her tracks.

The realization hit her, and suddenly she knew what the pains had all been about. *"All this time, I've been so worried that Thomas would leave, go away like John did and not return. I thought I might be left all alone again. That Charlotte might be left alone."*

But as she stood there praying for God to take care of her baby, she realized that Charlotte would never be left alone to fend for herself.

And that she'd never been left alone.

"When John died, I thought that I had been abandoned. But God never abandoned me. He led me here..."

She took a deep breath and one step forward, no longer afraid.

She stopped to pick up a large stick and continued towards the back garden, where the wolf's growls had softened.

Suddenly there was a gun shot, and she jumped back, falling to the ground, as she heard the sound of a wolf howling as it fell to the floor.

"Thomas!" she thought, picking herself up, running now towards the back of the house. *"I knew he wouldn't abandon us. I knew he would be here when we needed him the most!"*

She ran, flying around the corner, ready to fling herself into Thomas's arms, to thank him for being there, to swear to him that she would never be afraid again, that she had learned her lesson. That her faith and trust had been restored. In him. In God.

But she stopped as she turned the corner, and instead of seeing Thomas standing there with a rifle, she found Jedediah.

"Oh." She stopped and took a step back.

"Mollie..." he said, dropping the rifle to the ground.

She just stared at him. "I thought you were Thomas," she said quietly. She switched her heavy gaze to the wolf lying on the floor. "But now I see it's just you here, out hunting."

"Mollie, I wasn't hunting, I was..."

"It's fine, don't worry. Thank you Jedediah. But can you please get off my property now? I have Charlotte to worry about..."

"Mollie..."

"Please get that wolf away from here and leave," she said, quietly, as Jedediah nodded at her and picked up the wolf carcass, throwing it over his shoulder before he left, wordlessly.

As he walked away she glanced down at the riffle, still laying on the ground. She quickly looked through the window to check that Charlotte was still sleeping, before hurrying over to pick up the gun. She didn't like the idea of it laying there, so close to the house, so she quickly dragged it to the back of the garden, and walked into the shed, fixing it securely in position against the wall.

She dusted her hands off and headed back to the shed door, pulling it back with all her might, desperate to get out of there, but it was stuck.

"Oh no..." she said, jiggling it more frantically this time. "No...No..."

She kept pulling at the door, wiggling it, pushing it forward as hard as she could, then pulling it backward as hard as she could. No matter what she did the door wouldn't budge.

"Help!" she called out, but she knew the shed was too far back from the house, too far back from the street for her to be heard.

"Charlotte!" she called out, knowing it was helpless, but all she could think about was Charlotte lying alone in the house. *"All this worry about her being abandoned, now I've gone and done just that!"* Mollie wondered what other creatures might be out there, worried there could be other wolves around.

I knew this shed was a dangerous place! So badly constructed! I was

right to fear it... Oh, why did I have to send Jedediah away...just because I was angry he wasn't Thomas!"

As she sat down on the cold dirt floor and put her head on her knees, she began to sob, wetting the material of her dress, as it gathered in the dirt below her.

"Why wasn't it Thomas? Why couldn't he have been there?"

She stopped crying, wiping her eyes as she remembered the lesson she had learned earlier. *"When God teaches us a lesson, he often tests us on it soon after,"* she reminded herself, wiping her cheeks with the sleeves of her dress. She remembered to breath, not to panic.

She stood back up and headed towards the door; this time, instead of pulling the door back as hard as she could, she tried it gently. And the door popped open.

She heaved a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you, God."

She ran out of the shed, racing up the house, all the while thinking that couldn't wait to see Charlotte laying in her crib, to see her cute round rosy face and her pale green eyes. To hear her cry. To feel her gripping her finger with her tiny hands.

She pulled the back door open and sprinted to the crib.

But Charlotte was gone.

* * *

A REUNION

* * *

"Come on Kit, work with me here. You're Charlotte's Godfather now, so I was hoping that you and I would be able to see a little more eye-to-eye," Thomas said.

Kit put his axe down and squared up, looking Thomas right in the eye. "Don't go bringing Charlotte into this. The baby ain't gonna change my mind. I don't think you ought to be spending so much time away from home, and I ain't gonna change my mind on that. If anything, it is Charlotte I am thinking of. She needs her dad with her."

Thomas hung his head. "I know," he said, scuffing his boot into the dirt. He glanced up finally, shoving his hands in his pockets. "It's just that sometimes I don't feel as if I'm making a very good father."

"What do you mean?" Kit asked. "You're providing for Mollie and the child, and loving them."

"And I do love them, so much," he said. "It's just..." he sighed, digging his hands further into his pockets. "I found a photo of her first husband, hidden amongst her things." He brought his head back down, his shoulders slumped, as he began to kick the dirt again.

Kit reached out his hand and planted it on Thomas's shoulder. "Ah, Thomas, that's completely normal, ain't it. She was young when they married, and he was killed too young, before his time..." Kit trailed off, his voice breaking a little.

Thomas kept looking at the ground. "I know. He died on the

battleground, just like so many men we knew. It could have been me that died, Kit. How come I got to be lucky, how come I get to be with Mollie, and be a father to Charlotte, when this poor kid died?"

"Hey now," Kit said. "You can't go feeling guilty about that, like you're taking his place or somethin'. Mollie wouldn't want you to feel like that."

"I'm worried she feels like that," he said quietly. "Worried that she feels that I took John's spot. That I'm not good enough for her."

"Well look here," Kit said. "I sure don't think that's what she believes, for one thing. I've seen the way she looks at you, and she loves you, Thomas. Despite all your flaws. Despite the fact that you're out here, when you ought to be at home. Despite everything. Don't you think that says something? That she still wants you to be a father and husband, in spite of everything?"

He shrugged. "Why does she keep that photo then? Why did she hide it from me?"

Kit sighed. "Because he was her first love. And an important part of her life. She was probably trying to spare your feelings by not telling you about it. But, Thomas, you can't go clinging onto the past, or trying to compete with it. You've gotta look forward, appreciate what you've got here in front of you. Do better."

Thomas looked up, the realization dawning on him. "I need to go home," he said, reaching up to rub his brow. "Oh, I've been such a fool Kit. Trying to make plans, thinking of travelling, leaving home, when I've got a wife and baby there. Shucks, I've been so stupid."

A grin stretched over Kit's face. "Well what are you waiting for, Son? Go!"

Thomas nodded, giving the older man a thump on the back before he ran off. "Thanks, Kit. This is going to be the start of a new era, you mark my words!"

* * *

Mollie ran out onto the street, calling out frantically for help. Screaming "Charlotte, Charlotte," over and over again, thrashing around wildly, calling and crying for her baby.

"Charlotte! CHARLOTTE!"

Susan ran out into the street. "Mollie, what's happened?"

Mollie was frantic. "Charlotte has gone missing. Susan, I put her down in her crib just for a moment - to protect her you see - and now she is gone." She brought her hands up to her mouth and began to sob. "There are wild creatures around here, Susan, you know that, you've seen them yourself!"

Susan placed an hand on Mollie's shoulder. "I've seen them in the woods, but not here in town, Mollie. Please be calm, I'm sure nothing has taken your baby."

"Then where is she?" Mollie wailed. "Susan, where is she?"

"Mollie, calm down. Look down the road, will you?"

Mollie stopped and looked in the direction Susan was pointing. She leaned forward to catch her breath as her eyes focused. She saw

Thomas walking towards her, holding a small bundle, wrapped in wool, in his arms.

"Thomas..." she said, breathlessly, "You've got her?" She ran up to them both and reached for Charlotte, bringing her into her arms. "Oh, my sweet girl," she said, kissing her on the forehead. "Oh, I was so terrified." She turned to Thomas. "What happened, how did you get her?"

"I came into the house when I heard the gun shots, and found her lying there all alone..." Thomas said. "She was screaming, so I took her, brought her up to see Isabella to make sure she was okay."

Mollie struggled to get her breath back as she nodded, tears falling down her cheeks as she hugged the baby tight, smelling the sweet smell of the top of her head.

"I couldn't find you..." Thomas said. "I looked, and looked, but I had to protect Charlotte..."

"It's okay," Mollie said, nodding. "You did the right thing. You were there to protect her when she needed it. I just left her for a moment, and then I got trapped...Oh Thomas, I am so glad you were there for her, after all, when she needed it the most. I should have trusted you all along."

"Come here," he said, reaching out an arm, wrapping it around her and pulling her tight to him, so that both her and Charlotte were buried tight in his arms. "It's not going to be like this anymore, I promise, Mollie. I've been so busy trying to run the town, that I forgot what is really important..."

She glanced up at him. "But you were there when we needed you most, that's what really matters."

"It's going to be this way from now onwards."

* * *

"I'm just glad she wasn't hurt," Thomas said, laying Charlotte down in her crib. "She is, after all..." he almost choked up as he said the next words. "She is the only daughter I'll ever be able to have." He stared into the crib, not wanting to look at Mollie. Scared of her reaction.

"Thomas, what do you mean?"

He pulled back from the crib and looked at her. "I went to see Isabella about it. About an injury I received in the war. She confirmed what I feared, that I'll never be able to have children of my own."

Mollie stood still for a moment, then reached out for his hand, gripping it in hers. "Thomas, I'm sorry. I've been so caught up in my own health problems, I never even thought to ask about yours. Thomas, I'm sorry you had to go through this alone."

"Don't you be sorry," he said, reaching out to give her a cuddle. "Oh, Mollie, I'm the one who ought to be sorry. I'm sorry I kept this from you...sorry that I won't be able to give you any more kids." His eyes fell away from her. "Can I ever be enough for you?"

"Of course you can be, Thomas - why do you ask that?"

"I found that photo you keep, of John."

She dropped her head. "Oh." Then she whispered, "Thomas, I never meant for you to see that."

He stood there, staring over the crib. "I thought that you kept the photo - hid it from me - because you were still hanging on to him. Maybe you thought he was the perfect father and husband - the man I can never be."

"Oh, Thomas, don't be silly..."

He kept talking. "I need to say this, Mollie. Need you to tell me that I can be enough for you. That you trust me to take care of you, to provide for you and Charlotte."

She reached up and put an arm around him, her eyes filling with tears. "You are enough, Thomas. You, and Charlotte. You are all the family I need. All the family I have ever needed." She reached up and pulled Thomas's face back towards her. "And don't go thinking you need to prove yourself to me. All this running around, all these business deals, that's what they are all about, aren't they? Trying to prove something to me. When all along, all I needed was to know that you will be here for me. That you'll come home at the end of every day, safe and sound."

He nodded. "I think I was pushing so hard to prove something to you, that I almost ruined everything."

"Thomas, sometimes you can be a foolish man. Can you please trust, from now on, that I love you, and that you are a father to Charlotte? That you don't have to compete with anyone? Or prove to me that you are a man?"

"I can, Mollie. I love you as well." He reached down and stroked her cheek. "Can you trust that as well?"

"I can," she said, before she burrowed her head back into him, the tightness in her chest disappearing once and for all.

* * *

THE END

EPILOGUE

* * *

Two Months Later.

Thomas brought the photo out of his pocket, before setting it down on top of the fireplace. As Mollie watched, Charlotte in her arms, he reached down and picked up the brand new frame that was sitting on the arm of the rocking chair, as he carefully took out the back of the frame, before sliding the photo into it.

"You know, you don't have to forget John altogether. In fact, that's the last thing I want you to do, Mollie."

Mollie nodded and burrowed her face into Thomas's chest. "Thank you for being so understanding." She was quiet for a moment as Thomas pulled out the stand on the back of the frame, so that it could sit upright on the fire place, taking pride of place in the center. She gazed at the face for a second, before adding. "I did love him so, you know. I was awful young though, Thomas."

"I understand," Thomas said, quietly. "And I know he was a brave man, and that he must have loved you so much, Mollie." He leaned back and smiled down at her. "How could anyone not?"

She laughed a little and ducked her head, almost embarrassed at the compliment. "I'm sure people could not love me."

"Nonsense. That's not possible." He looked back at the photograph, of the young man in uniform.

"I know what it takes to fight in a war, as well, Mollie. What it

can do to a person. The toll it can take on our souls, and our bodies. I know that better than anyone, even if it doesn't always show on the outside. And I never want to disrespect what he went through. Or erase what you went through before you came to me. It all makes you who you are."

Below them, Charlotte made a gurgling noise. She reached out and grabbed Thomas's hand, gripping it tightly, staring up at him with her big green eyes. Mollie watched the two of them together, wondering, for a few moments, at the way God's plans could take a person in a direction they never would have picked for themselves.

"You're a great father to her," she said. "And she is going to grow up so happy, and proud of you."

"She is going to be so proud to have you as her mother," Thomas said, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead.

Then they both turned towards baby Charlotte, sleeping soundly in her crib. "I can't believe how lucky I am, after everything..." Mollie said. "Maybe I didn't get what I wanted, or what I planned. But I got exactly what I needed. From now on I will always trust God's plan for me."

"And no more worrying?" Thomas asked.

She looked down at her sleeping baby. "Maybe a bit," she said, gazing at the fragile little face. "With a child, I can never stop completely. But trust, and love - my love for both you and Charlotte - will outweigh that."

"I love you too, Mollie. It's just the three of us now. Safe and

sound, here together."

If you have enjoyed reading **BRIDES OF HOPE & DESTINY** and **THREE BRIDES FOR THREE WAR COMRADES** series, you may want to check it out another **6 BOOKS boxed set** (2 NEW series NEVER published before and is ONLY available in this boxed set) that might interest you.

*Here's a sneak peek at **CHRISTMAS MAIL ORDER BRIDES** series (NEW series NEVER before published):*

Book1 ~ Lonely Justin Saved By His Weary Christmas Bride . . .



1902 Akron, Virginia

“Papa!” Alaya screamed at the top of her lungs. It was a wail of pure anguish that could be heard clear across the county. Never before had such a scream ever left her lips and as she stared at the man she had loved for all her twenty-seven years, laying on his death bed, she knew she would never feel such anguish ever again, she would never allow herself to.

“Come Alaya,” her mother said, wrapping her arms around her and trying to console her eldest child. “He is gone my love, and we have to accept that.”

Her mother’s words sounded like those of one of those horror novels she loved to read. Actually, his passing was like she was living her greatest fear and her legs gave way beneath the pressure of the tsunami of life that rolled over her. She sobbed uncontrollably in her mother’s arms, having lost her first love- her father. The man who had stood by her side throughout it all. She felt like she had been raked

through the fire and her soul dragged out of her through her heart.

She sobbed... she wailed... she cried...

At the end of it all they allowed her half the day by his side, and when the coroner came to take his body away, she walked behind the slow drawn carriage all the way to the funeral home where she said her final goodbyes. Her life would never be the same again- not without him. As she slowly made her way home, grief gave way to reality and the bells of the old cathedral chimed the loss of her father, the town's most beloved member of the council. He was her family's sole bread winner and now... Well, things were going to change drastically... there was no doubt about that.

For three days there was nothing but silence in the house, her six siblings left her to her own space to mourn her loss, speaking to her only to remind her that she had to eat. On the fourth day when she emerged for his burial, she spoke to no one. Tightly gripping her mother's hand and trying her dearest not to fall apart again was her sole mission. When the many faces of the mourners and well-wishers went on their way, she again holed up in her room and did not come out until her mother's voice could be heard trying to keep her siblings in line.

They were seven, she being the eldest and the youngest being no older than four with a penchant for mischief and ears that ignored all warnings. But when her face emerged from her quarters he ran to her for an embrace and she willingly accepted it.

"Why must Mama speak to you a million times before you take heed?" she asked the little imp who smiled at her before resting a kiss on her eyelids...her weary eyelids.

“I listen,” he countered, hugging her and nestling his face in the crook of her neck. She chuckled, allowing him this one fib that would make him feel better about his wrong doings. She really was in no mood to dispel it in any event. Looking beyond them to where her other siblings had paused in their daily chores, she saw pity across their faces and it instantly angered her.

“What?” she asked them in annoyance.

“Are you okay?” her eldest brother asked. She liked him the best, for he was kind of heart and gentle in spirit, but for the moment his question angered her.

She chose to kiss him on the cheek, instead of responding to him in a manner he did not deserve. He took her seat in the kitchen and they all sat with her in silence. Her father had been a hard man to like, he had been a strict man and most of them had never truly connected with him. But he was always so strict, and they all could definitely agree on that.

“I am okay everybody,” she said and tried to muster a smile for their benefit. They didn’t buy into her act but they had the good senses enough to leave her be. And so breakfast continued on in a tense silence. It was the first one they’d all sit through together since her father had died.

“I want to speak to you all about something, he mother began, and even before the words left her lips Alaya knew exactly what she was going to be speaking about.

“What is it mother?” her rather obnoxious little sister, Aira, asked.

Her mother took a deep breath before she continued speaking and she could hear the desperation in each word. “Many of you will now have to seek jobs as your father brought all the money in. He left us a bit of money, but after covering his burial cost we do not have much left.”

“Work?” Aira said, slamming her fist on the table. “I cannot go out and work now, I will get calluses and no man will want to marry me!”

“Because your sole purpose on the face of the earth is to have some man want to marry you, isn’t it?” Alaya asked rolling her eyes. She really had had enough of her sister’s shenanigans and childish temperament.

“Just because no man wants you, doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want to get married some day!” her sister snapped back at her.

On a regular day she would have lashed back at her sister, but she did not have the energy to argue with her today. Besides, her baby brother was too busy covering her in kisses for her to give in to the negative backlash of her arrogant and prissy little sister. One thing was for sure though as she listened to her mother detail the things that would have to change around the house, and that was that she would have to find herself a wealthy husband, or a job very soon.

* * *

SEE HOW THE STORY ENDS

[*Click Here To Get Started*](#)

MAIL ORDER BRIDES OF WESTERN ROMANCE

1

CRIPPLED BRIDE AND HER AMBITIOUS MINER

THE BEGINNING

* * *

Philadelphia, Winter, 1849

Philadelphia had a bitter cold this time of the year, and a frost had enveloped the stately homestead of the prestigious Duggar family. Upstairs, Ava Duggar surveyed the white covered streets below, trying to ignore the throbbing in her leg, knowing that she had a full day of work ahead of her and no time to focus on the old injury that played up this time of the year.

Downstairs, she heard the sound of the door flinging open, and the wind blustering through, so fast and bitter that Ava felt it against her skin almost immediately. Assuming that she must have forgotten to batten the door down, she limped over to the bedroom door, towards the cane that was her old faithful friend. "Bother," she said, limping over to the landing, thinking about the struggle ahead. She grabbed her cane and first balanced her weight on her good leg, her right leg, before gently lowering the left leg after it. The process was slow and painful, and Ava couldn't believe she'd been silly enough to leave the door wide open during a frost.

"Mama?" she called out, in surprise, eying the older woman as she peered over the landing. "Why, what are you doing up? You haven't been outside, in this weather, have you? You're supposed to be resting with your cold!"

It took a moment for Ava to see that her ma was doubled over, kneeling on the floor, her shawl falling down over her head. It wasn't her ma who'd opened the door at all, but her pa. Ava looked up startled, surprised to see the tall figure standing there. As the Mayor of Philadelphia, Pa Duggar was supposed to have been in New York for the month. Ava hadn't expected to see him for at least another two weeks, and the sight of him immediately troubled her.

"Pa...?" she whispered. "What are you...?" She stopped talking altogether when she saw the fury in the man's eyes.

Oh, what is it this time? Ava thought, her heart beating fast as she

thought back to what might have angered her pa so. *Another rage over absolutely nothing*, Ava thought, *probably because someone has dared to speak to him the wrong way, and he is taking it out on Ma, like usual.*

Seeing that her ma was in distress, Ava descended the stairs as quickly as she could, wincing as she went, but determined to get to the bottom as fast as she could to protect her ma from her father's blows.

"How could you do this to me?! To this family?!" her pa bellowed, so loudly that he practically drowned out the howling wind behind him. Ava longed to pull the door closed behind him, as snow and sleet were pushing onto the parlor floor, but there were more pressing matters to attend to, with her ma crying helplessly on the floor.

"Pa! What are you doing?!" Ava cried out, her cane dropping to the floor as she knelt down to protect her ma.

"She's done nothing to earn your pity, girl!" her pa yelled out. "She is a disgrace, a blight to this family, and I'll be darned if I let her stay in this house a minute longer!"

Ava gazed up in horror. "Pa, why do you say all these terrible things..."

It was then the whole sad story came piling out. Ava could scarcely believe her ears as her pa bellowed and yelled, giving details of her ma's betrayal of the family, of her husband, in excruciating detail. Ava would have run from the room if she could have. Instead, she had to listen, in shock and disbelief. An affair? Her ma? She shook her head, refusing to believe that any of her pa's accusations were true.

"Papa, please, stop this," she begged, but he continued to bellow, to slam his fist down, to tell of the scandalous things that made Ava's cheeks burn and her heart hurt.

For Ava, tears were a luxury she seldom let herself afford. In fact, she hadn't allowed a tear to fall down her cheeks since her accident thirteen years earlier. But under circumstances like these, the tears sprung to her eyes without warning, a reflex that Ava couldn't control.

"Mama, tell me this isn't true," she pleaded, kneeling down beside

her weeping mother. "Tell me these are lies - falsehoods. Oh, they've got to be."

Her ma looked up at Ava with blotchy, plum red cheeks, her eyes watery and regretful. "Oh Ava, please forgive me."

* * *

It took nights of praying before any sort of peace took place in Ava's heart. During this time, her Pa had vanished back to New York, with the promise that he would throw Ava and her Ma out of the house if they were still there when he returned.

Ava came gingerly down the stairs, the pain in her damaged leg nothing compared to the pain she felt in her chest as she saw her Ma bent over the table, her head buried in her arms, her back rising up and down in time with her sobs.

"Surely, he can't be heartless enough to cast us out onto the streets!" Ava cried. "What kind of man could be cruel enough to do such a thing?"

Ava's ma wrapped the blanket around her shoulders even tighter. Her voice was grave and quiet as she spoke. "I don't deserve his mercy, Ava."

Ava stood up quickly, without thinking, and winced at the pain in her leg. "Pa might not show you his mercy, but God will. Ma, I know this is true. This isn't right. No matter what you've done, you don't deserve to be cast out onto the street with nothing."

Her ma looked up with the slightest bit of hope in her eyes. "So does this mean that you've found it in your heart to forgive me, Ava?"

She sat back down and took her ma's hand in her own. "Of course, I have mama. It's not my place to judge you. Besides that, I could never be as cruel and heartless as papa is being to you, to us!" She felt anger stem inside her again and fought to quell it. The time for being angry was already passed. Ava had to look forward now. She has to make a plan for what happens next. Without her pa's money, or support, or even a roof over their heads, Ava and her ma were likely to starve to death on the streets unless Ava could come up with a plan.

"Oh, what are we going to do?" her ma cried out in despair. "Ava, how are we going to survive?"

Ava's resolve was firm as she rubbed her ma's back and stated: "Don't worry Mama, it will all be alright."

* * *

That night, Ava reached below her pillow and took out the notice she'd had hidden there for days. She could have sworn that even as she'd slept the last few nights, that the words had made their way into her thoughts and dreams. She could recite the words off by heart at this stage.

Wife Wanted For Californian Miner:

*To be a good wife to a miner in the Californian mine fields.
Looking for a hard worker, a kind and loving woman to be the wife of
respected, wealthy miner.*

California, she thought. On the other side of the country, it may as well have been on the other side of the globe. She could barely picture it, even in her mind.

Gold, that was the other word that she turned over in her mind. She'd heard the tales of the rough, lawless towns out West, about how the gold rush had caused men and women to leave their lives in the pursuit of the precious metal.

Would she be one of them? *Could she be one of them?*

She sighed, closing her eyes. *What about the stagecoach journey*, she thought. *The weeks of travelling will be so difficult with my leg.*

She shook her head each time a doubt like this crept in, as if to expel them from her mind. What other option was there for her? For her Ma? She read over the notice again. *Wealth. Gold.* Despite the difficulties, this seemed the only option. Her Ma was too old to work, and Ava herself would never be hired for work as a governess or teacher with her handicap.

She looked up. *God? Have you placed this notice in my hands?*

She wouldn't necessarily have to love the man - this miner who lived in California. She'd just need to be a good wife to him, and to work as hard as she could to make a life out there. And then, with time, she decided, she would be able to send any spare money she had back to Philadelphia. Perhaps even send for her Ma eventually to join her in California.

The decision was finally made, and Ava made the long descent down the stair case.

* * *

Ava sat down at the sturdy timber table that had played host to thousands of family dinners in far happier times, and explained the situation to her Ma.

Ava's ma wept as she spoke. "Ava, I cannot let you do this."

"There's no other choice for me or for us," Ava replied firmly. Outwardly, her resolve had to remain firm. If she allowed cracks to show on the inside, she might break on the inside. "Once I'm there, I'll be able to send money back here for you."

Her ma looked up in disbelief. "Ava you're speaking as though your mind is already made up. You've not thought this through, my child! How are you supposed to conduct yourself in a mining town, with your leg?"

Ava felt taken aback. The injury was a subject that was rarely broached between them. Like many things in their conservative family, it was something that hung unspoken in the air; a taboo subject never mentioned. Like other topics, it that had been buried over the years.

Ava was quiet for a moment, then spoke softly. "Mama, I will be able to get on with my injury. This has been part of my life for many years now. I can cope."

Her Ma was not willing to let the subject rest with that. "Ava, you also know nothing of being a wife..."

These words also stung Ava. Another subject that was rarely

broached. Ava cleared her throat before speaking bravely. "I know I've become a spinster now, Ma, and I've been happy enough here with you. I'd made my peace with what..." Her words faltered her for a moment. "With what happened when I was eighteen - being jilted at the aisle. It's hardly a memory I can ever forget, but now is the time to move on. I'm thirty-one now. Without Pa's money, Ma, we have no other way to support ourselves. I must marry."

"But marry a stranger?" her Ma rasped.

"Well, there's hardly anyone here in Philly that I can marry, is there?" Ava asked with some indignation. "Pa will make sure of that."

Ma reached out her hand and grasped Ava's. "Ava, perhaps I can still speak to your Pa, convince him to at least let you stay here. I'm the one that should take the blame, not you."

Ava shook her head. "Papa is convinced that I was somehow in on the deception. He sees that you and I are so close and attached to each other in so many ways." She stopped and looked into her Ma's watery eyes. "And we are Mama. That's why even if Pa let me stay, let me keep his money and support, I couldn't do it. I can't leave you on your own, Mama, to fend for yourself."

"Oh Ava, you don't know what you're getting yourself in for." Her Ma dropped her head again in sorrow.

"I do Mama. I have thought this through to the end."

"Ava I don't think you can..."

"I can," she replied firmly. "And I'm going to."

* * *

JACKSON

* * *

Gold Creek 1849, Spring, one month later.

Jackson Abrams set off over the dusty earth of Gold Creek, feet heavy but firm as he strode towards his destination - his gold mine. *This is going to be the day*, he thought.

The day I strike it rich.

He could feel it in the air. The sense of possibility seemed to crackle in the hot Californian sun. The gold mine - *his* gold mine, as he'd come to think of it, was located about three miles East of his homestead, down by the creek, and he preferred to walk each day rather than ride on horseback. He liked to feel the thud of the earth against his feet, and he appreciated being able to take the time to survey the settlement as he walked, taking off his hat as he greeted each member of the town, bowing politely, taking in their glowing respect and admiration.

"Jackson," Miss Clarabelle greeted him, bowing her head shyly.

"Miss Clarabelle," he replied in turn, bobbing his hat and smiling politely at the young lady, who giggled softly and turned her head away before Jackson could see.

Next up was Doc, out the front of his practice. "Howdy Jackson!" he called out. "You're looking impressive today! Big day, is it?"

Jackson spun around and grinned. "It's going to be, Doc! I can just

about feel it!"

"Well, make sure ya bring some of that gold back up here when ya done! Share it with the rest of us!" The old man called out in a wheezy voice.

Jackson grinned, his wide smile showing off his perfect teeth. It was the kind of smile that would have made Miss Clarabelle blush, if she hadn't already hidden herself away under the awning of the General Store her father owned.

"Make no doubt about it!" Jackson called. "When I finally hit that gold, we're all going to strike it rich!"

"You're a good boy, Jackson," Doc called out, and the other townsfolk milling about nodded in agreement, looking at him with eyes glimmering with admiration.

Yes, he thought, *this is my town*.

* * *

Jackson lifted his hat up when he finally reached his mine, a deep pit, eight feet into the ground, which backed up onto the creek bed on one side, and the flat farm land on the other. As he arrived, there were polite greetings from the men, some "Howdy boss"s and other nods of respect, as his workers lifted their hats in turn. Less jolly than the usual greetings they gave him, but Jackson didn't think too much of it at first glance.

With his feet apart, he surveyed the operation. He walked over and gave his pal Benjamin a friendly slap on the back. Benjamin was

his eyes and ears on the ground while he wasn't there, a sort of second-in-command.

"What's it looking like today?" Jackson asked. "Think our luck's about to come in old chap?"

Benjamin hesitated for a moment, his weight resting on a spade as he leant forward, seemingly deep in thought.

Jackson could read the worry in the other man's face. "What's going on Benji?"

"Nothing," Ben muttered, straightening himself up, as he began digging in the ground.

Jackson placed a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Tell me, son. I can see that something's not right here. Your face looks troubled. You can't lie to me. Your words may say one thing but your face is telling me something else entirely." Jackson glanced up at the sun and squinted. Such a perfect day. A day he'd been sure was going to bring him good news. Now the sinking feeling in his stomach was telling him otherwise.

Ben tried to wriggle out of answering again. "It's nothin' to get worked up about boss. It's just that..."

Now Jackson was really starting to become concerned. He glanced around at the other men and noticed that they were all also carefully avoiding his gaze. "Ben you better tell me what's going on, right away. I'll not ask you again."

Ben sighed and tipped his hat back, leaning on his shovel. As he

began to explain, he avoided full eye contact with Jackson. "It's just that...the mine seems to be causing considerable damage to the creek bed."

"What do you mean?" Jackson asked, whipping his head around to survey the creek bed. At first glance, he couldn't see anything wrong.

"Well, I don't know how to tell you this boss, but it looks as though if we keep digging and excavating like we have been, the entire creek bed might collapse, taking the mine with it." Ben scratched his head. "There are signs of crumbling, and the wall looks liked it might cave in if we keep going."

Jackson barely knew how to react; he couldn't believe his ears. "Like we have been?" He turned and looked around at the men in the pit, noticing that they had slowed down, that barely any progress had been made that day. He also clocked the sullen, glum looks that haunted their faces. "What do you mean by this, Benji? Are you telling me that we can't mine anymore?"

"We can..." Ben started to explain, slowly. "But I'm not sure how long we have until the entire thing falls in. Days, maybe or a week if we're lucky."

Jackson was at a loss for words. *This can't possibly be happening*, he thought. The mine had barely produced any gold so far; most of the gold deposits that he felt sure still lay in there would still take weeks of digging to reach. Months maybe. His operation was a long term one, not short term.

"But we can't stop now," he said, lowering his voice so that only Benjamin could hear. No need to alarm the other men, or let everyone

know the level of his concern. "Do the others know how bad it is?"

Ben shook his head. "They know something is up, but they don't have the level of expertise that I have, I suppose, to be able to tell how serious the situation is."

Jackson scratched his head for a moment. "Right," he said firmly, making a decision. "Keep digging then."

"But boss..." Ben tried to say, in protest.

"You heard me man," Jackson said. "We can't give up now."

* * *

On his way back into town, Jackson overheard two women sniggering as he passed them. He was used to female attention, but something told him that this time that the words that slipped from their mouths were not the usual flattering comments he'd come to expect.

As he walked past he caught a snippet of their comments.

"...Mine collapse."

"He's pushing them too far," another one whispered, holding her lace gloved hand up to her mouth as she did.

What did these women know of what went on down at the mines? He thought. But his worries ran deeper than that. If the wives of his men were gossiping about the mine and the chance of a possible collapse, that meant that his workers did actually know of the danger, and they'd been talking about it at home, speaking ill of him behind his

back.

He didn't feel betrayed, not especially. Whenever a man was powerful like him in any community or settlement, this kind of thing was to be expected. Yes, he appreciated loyalty from his workers, but he'd also come to expect some degree of traitorous activity. He had ambitions to enter politics, the big leagues in San Francisco, once he was done with his time in Gold Creek. So he knew gossip and perhaps even betrayal were some of the things he'd need to get used to.

No, what bothered him was that bad gossip like this would spread quickly in such a small community, ruin his good reputation before it had really had chance to take foot. And he couldn't afford to sully the good name he had worked so hard to make for himself. He had founded Gold Creek, and that had earned him the love and respect of the residents. That glimmer of admiration they had in their eyes as he passed was something he'd gotten used to and that he now craved and had come to rely on. But that kind of love and admiration could quickly slip away. It could wash away as readily as the creek bank.

His pace quickened as he hurried to get away from the women. He gave a brief wave to Doc as he passed, and noticed that even the old man seemed to wave with less enthusiasm than he'd had that morning.

As Jackson raced back to his home, eager to avoid the prying eyes and idle gossip, he thought about his future. He thanked God that he had his plan in the works, for how to make himself good in the hearts and minds of the town folk again. This bad gossip was just that - gossip. Whenever he had to make a hard decision, such as the decision to keep digging, it was because he had the best interests of the town in mind. The only way to turn Gold Creek into the thriving town he

knew it could be if they had money coming into it. Gold. Gold would provide them all the money to secure the settlement's future. His only goal was to take care of the people in his town even if he had to make tough decisions along the way that might make him temporarily unpopular.

But yes, he had a plan; one that was already set in motion.

He was going to marry.

A bride! He'd been impressed at his own ingenuity when he'd come up with the idea. What better way to get back in the favor and good graces of his friends and neighbors than by marrying? The gossip would cease, at least for a while. That was his way of thinking. It would also go some way towards restoring his reputation as a bachelor who was incapable of settling down.

And then if he dared to hope, maybe; just maybe his new bride would be more than just a way to restore his good reputation. For as Jackson had placed the advertisement with the mail order bride company, he sent with it a prayer that God would send to him his perfect match. For that's what he wanted: a perfect bride who would be a strong worker, a kind person, a valued addition to the town, and someone who could love him back in the same way.

And Jackson Abrams was the sort of man who usually got what he wanted.

* * *

THE MEETING

* * *

Gold Creek 1849, two weeks later.

The weeks on the stage coach had taken their toll on Ava, who was so grateful when she finally stepped gingerly onto the platform of Gold Creek station that she almost fell to the earth and kissed the ground. But, of course, she was far too proper for that, and she'd never dream of making such a scene, or such an odd first impression on her new husband.

Not that she cared too much one way or another what her soon-to-be-husband Jackson Abrams thought of her. Of course, it would be nice if he liked her, and she liked him, but she knew that their marriage was something of a practicality, and she didn't dare to dream that it would be more than that. She'd been through enough heartache all those years ago. She knew that hoping and dreaming of love only ended up in hurt and pain. Nowadays, she kept a far more sensible head.

Besides, Jackson Abrams had told her in his letters that he was a miner. He'd probably turn up at the station filthy with dirt and dust, and stinking of days out in the sun. She scrunched up her nose and squinted as she looked around the platform of Gold Creek station. She wore a long, white lace dress with a blue trim that skimmed the ground as she turned around, with matching bonnet and her long blonde hair tucked up delicately underneath. From glancing around at the other women on the platform, she could already see that she stuck out like a sore thumb in her fine, formal attire. The other women seemed to wear dresses made out of much sturdier material. The kind

of fabric that it didn't matter if you got down on your hands and knees in the dirt. Her white lace dress would be ruined by even a fleck of dust.

Still, it was the dress she had chosen. Despite herself, despite knowing that there would be no grand romance waiting for her in Gold Creek, she'd wanted to wear her best and finest dress when she first met her husband. She rarely allowed herself such silly fancies, and she'd never have admitted that she was trying to impress, but deep down she was proud that she looked her best.

She stood very still as she waited. There was no sense in putting any strain on her leg until she absolutely had to. Besides, a limp didn't look very dignified in her fine white and blue dress. Not the first impression she wanted to give.

Where was Jackson? she thought, beginning to get just slightly frustrated. She valued punctuality, and made a point to never keep others waiting. She sighed, supposing this was just how they did things out this way, in a town like this. She'd heard the rumors about these gold mining communities. No rules. No laws. Probably no respect for other people's time either. She might be waiting till nightfall for all she knew.

Eventually she could no longer keep her leg upright without great pain, so she limped over to a seat in the shade of the platform, unaware that her groom was watching her from the other end of the platform.

* * *

Jackson furrowed his brow. Could this really be her? Ava Duggar?

From the description she'd given him in her letters, she seemed to match. Tallish, slim, delicate looking with a small nose and fine ivory skin. Looked like she'd never seen the sun, he thought. But as she was from Philly, that might go some way to explaining that.

But she hadn't said anything in her correspondence about a limp. He took his hat off and scratched his head. Perhaps she'd just had a recent injury, or her leg had become cramped during the long stage coach journey. Yes, that made sense. It was probably nothing to be concerned over. He cleared his throat and strode over to her, trying to maintain his usual confident manner. To his surprise though, he felt nervous. Not used to this feeling, he tried to shake it off, gave himself a quick talking to as he approached his soon-to-be bride. "Come on now, there's nothing to worry about! She's just a woman, for crying out loud."

She wasn't just a woman though, and something in Jackson's heart and stomach were telling him that. He took a deep breath before he finally spoke to the woman in the white and blue lace dress, startling her as he did so.

"Ava?" he asked.

She remained seated, knowing it was proper to stand, but worried her leg would not hold her under such circumstances. She nodded and looked at him briefly before she averted her gaze back to the ground.

Jackson stood there for a second and cleared his throat again. He reached a hand out shyly and coughed. "Here, let me help you up."

"Oh," Ava said quietly. "There's no need. Truly, I can stand up myself."

He brought his hand back and placed it in his pocket for a moment, before bringing it back out, not quite knowing what to do. He finally reached over for her bag. "Let me take this for you then."

"Thank you," Ava said, still sitting, hands placed in her laps, as she caught a few glimpses of this strange man from under her bonnet.

He was no dirty, dusty, miner; that was for sure. He was gleaming clean, with a bright, wide smile and perfect teeth standing straight in a row. The only touch of wildness about him was perhaps his hair: certainly longer than the men back in Philadelphia had worn it. But she supposed there might not be much cause to go to the barber in a town like this. Besides, his slightly-too-long brown curls fell onto his face in a way that she found strangely attractive. Jackson didn't look like any man she'd ever seen back home.

Finally, she placed one hand besides her on the seat and used the weight of her arm to lift herself up, carefully balancing herself on her good leg, as she was so used to doing. She caught a flicker of concern in Jackson's eyes as she did so. They each looked away from the other before their gazes locked for too long.

"Did you...did you have a safe journey?" Jackson asked.

"Yes. Fine, thank you," Ava answered politely, attempting to walk.

"Oh. That's good. I just thought you may have had some sort of...discomfort on the coach."

"No, I'm fine," she answered quickly.

"Right," he said, turning away and carrying her bag.

As they walked along in silence, Jackson wondered how he could broach the subject. In Gold Creek, he was used to talking a little bit more candidly and freely; there was something about creating a new settlement that caused the residents to occasionally do away with their manners, but he could tell that Ava Duggar was from a different kind of town. It seemed awfully improper to just come right out and ask what was wrong with her leg. Was it just a temporary injury - a result of the cramped conditions on the coach? Or was it something more serious?

* * *

The wedding ceremony ended with a cheer as Jackson's men - Benji, Doc, and other friends came up to slap him on the back and offer their congratulations. The women nodded graciously, eyeing Ava with a mixture of both shyness and suspicion.

"Pretty, yes," Clarabelle whispered to her friend. "But so proper! Look at how she stand so straight and still."

"And with that *cane*," the other one whispered before they collapsed in hushed whispers. Ava tried to ignore their bad manners, and, in fact, found it quite easy to do so as her head was full of a thousand other thoughts. She barely had time to make head nor tail of her new surroundings. Her fine dress felt tight and restrictive against her skin in the baking hot sun. And every time she moved, she kicked more dirt and dust up onto her skirt.

The people here are so rowdy, she thought, looking around at the people, in their plain clothes and hats, hooting and hollering at the wedding celebrations. A far cry from the sort of decency she was used to back in Philly. She stayed close by to her new husband, not wishing

to leave his sight, as the rest of the town folk came up and took a good look at her. She smiled politely and bowed her head each time a compliment was bestowed upon her, blushing at how forward, how familiar, some of the people were as they spoke to her.

Then there was the town itself. She couldn't help staring in dismay as she looked at the make-shift buildings that passed for shops and stores in this town. Some of them looked as though they could blow right over if a strong gust of wind was to blow though the main street.

She told herself to take a deep breath, to not rush to judgment.

This is my home now. It's time to make the best of it, not to jump to conclusions and to see the worst. After all, the people seem kind, and friendly enough, and as far as the buildings go, this is a new town. Things can't be perfect right away.

As the men of the town flocked around her and her husband, congratulating Jackson on his new, pretty bride from Philadelphia, Ava stood silently, taking it all in.

Doc turned to Ava and grinned at her. "I hope you're ready for the life of the wife of a politician!" He winked at Ava, who turned away, feeling as though she had been punched in the stomach.

* * *

As they travelled back from the wedding, a silence fell between them. There was so much both of them wanted to ask, but neither of them felt comfortable to broach the subjects that hung there untouched. Ava took note of the small, new settlement as they passed

through it. She was used to the tall building. The steel and rock of Philly, and the rickety wooden buildings with their windows that banged in the wind, and the doors that looked like they might just fall off their hinges at the slightest hint of wind, made her nervous.

Eventually, it was Ava who spoke up first. "You want to become a politician?" she asked. She tried to keep her voice steady and calm, but she could hear the sense of dismay that came out anyway. "Was that really true, what that man said to me, or was he simply teasing me?"

Jackson nodded. "Yes, I do wish to enter the political game. Eventually when Gold Creek is up and running - fully functional, of course. There's still a lot of work to be done here. It could be many years before I am ready to leave for San Francisco."

Ava remained dead silent. She had no idea what to say in response to this terrible revelation. A politician? After everything she had gone through with her pa? Oh, but Jackson wasn't to know all of that. She'd never told him anything about her parents. It had all been too painful to mention. She'd never have dreamed that her future husband would be wanting to join the same profession that she'd just run away from.

"Ava, I need to ask you something as well," Jackson finally said.

She was shaken out of her own thoughts. "Of course," she said, politely. "There shouldn't be any secrets between us now that we are husband and wife."

"What's wrong with your leg?" he asked, a little too bluntly.

She coughed a little. Jackson may have been her husband, but she was still not used to people asking in such a straightforward manner. Back home, people had stared but never asked questions.

"An accident," she replied softly. "When I was eighteen. Thirteen years ago or thereabout."

She dared to glance at him from under her bonnet, to sneak a peek at his reaction to that. She saw it: there was no mistaking the crestfallen expression along with the disappointment that flooded his face.

"Oh," he said, at last. "So, it's...permanent then."

"It is."

They continued to walk in silence for half a mile.

"Ava," Jackson said finally. "I want things to be perfect between us."

"Perfect?" she asked, looking up at him and frowning. "Jackson, you do know there's no such thing as perfect, don't you?" These were the most words she had spoken to him since their wedding. She was surprised at the passion in her voice. Perfect? Who spoke in such a way? She found herself dismayed now, to see that she had married such an idealistic dreamer. What kind of expectations must he have of her? Of their marriage? She couldn't manage 'perfect'. All her life she felt like she'd barely managed 'adequate'. She knew she wasn't perfect. One look down at her leg confirmed that.

If he wanted perfect, how was she ever going to be good enough

for him?

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

* * *

THE TROUBLE STARTS

* * *

Gold Creek, 1849, one month later

With his reputation back intact, and the good favor of the town restored to him, Jackson took off down to his mine one particularly bright late Spring morning with a renewed confidence. Luck certainly seemed to have turned around for him since those premature warnings a month earlier. His men must have been overreacting! Business down at the mine had been running smoothly ever since, with no sign of any further damage to the creek bed. In fact, Jackson had almost forgotten about all those old troubles when he arrived at the mine that morning.

There were worries in his head though, sure. Just not about the mine.

His mind was foggy with other concerns that revolved around his new bride, Ava. Jackson was, as far as he was concerned, putting on a brave face when he was around Ava. Trying not to let her know how deep his worries ran. He'd seen how out of place she was in Gold Creek. How the other women gossiped about her, the way they looked at her, in her proper clothes, and her strange walk. He wanted to protect her from them, from anyone who would speak unkindly about her, but he wasn't sure how. Even with him, she still seemed so reserved. How could he look after her when she wouldn't let him? She'd barely even speak to him about her handicap, and the troubles she faced.

Perhaps, she was putting on her own brave face, he pondered, as he reached the gold mine. He vowed to speak with her that evening,

and made a promise to himself that they would talk properly and lay all these issues out.

Joe Colt, a farmer who owned a property and farm that backed onto the edge of the mine, came running over to him, practically shaking a fist as he ran. His face was red as a beet as he started exclaiming.

"Woah there," Jackson said, holding his hands up in surrender. "Slow down there Joe. I can't make out a word you're saying when you're hollering like that. Take a deep breath and tell me what the matter is."

"I'll tell you what's the matter alright," Joe sputtered, his straw hat almost falling to the ground as he hopped from one foot to the other in some kind of angry dance. "Your bleedin' mine has caused irreparable damage to my crops! The soil is all but ruined, where my farm runs onto it. How am I supposed to feed my family? How am I supposed to support any of us when I can't grow my crops?"

Jackson frowned and squinted as he looked over the old man's shoulder towards his mine. "What are you talking about Joe?"

Joe huffed and puffed as he struggled to get the words out in his fury. "Myself and other farmers rely on the water from the creek to grow our crops! The pollution and damage you're causing is going to put us all out of food and water, don't ya know?"

Jackson stood with his hands on his hips, trying to placate the man.

"I'm telling you now Jackson... If you don't do something about

this, I'm gonna have to get the whole town involved! This mine lark of yours has gone on long enough. You're so pig-headed with it that you can't see the long term effects. This gold mine is nothing but a scheme. A get rich quick scheme, I'm as sure as day! If we can't farm the lands and grow crops, what's the point? The settlement is going to collapse as quickly as it was established."

"Just calm down," Jackson insisted, trying to keep his voice calm and soothing. He didn't want Joe being overheard by anyone else. What he was saying couldn't possibly be true: could a mine really cause so much damage? "You're overreacting Joe. Surely you can't blame the mine or me! Probably, something's just gone wrong with your soil, or your farming practices..."

Joe's mouth dropped open. "Are you saying I don't know what I'm doing? That I don't know how to run my own farm?" He shook his head, bits of spittle flying out of his mouth in his anger and rage. He took a step closer till he was right up in Jackson's face. "We all followed you out here, remember? Based on all your promises of finding gold. Well, where is all this so-called gold?"

"It's coming, Joe. We just need to keep mining till we strike it rich."

"How much longer is that going to take?" Joe spat. "We've waited long enough. It's time to shut that bleedin' mine down and concentrate on other matters. Farming. Things that will actually sustain this town. It's time we all got our heads out of the clouds and stopped chasing these ridiculous dreams of yours." He held his face in front of Jackson's for a moment, breathing heavily.

"Joe..." Jackson tried to protest. "Let's just talk about this calmly."

"Oh, we'll talk about it all right! At tomorrow night's town meeting, all of this is going to come to light, Jackson, and there's nothing you can do about it! This mine is going to get closed down for good!"

* * *

Indoors was where Ava found herself most days. She could feel Jackson's disappointment in her, could sense it in the things he didn't say, but he never pushed her to do anything she didn't feel up to. However, Ava was fed up with feeling as though she was such a delicate object that she might break at any time.

On that particular morning, Jackson had left with the usual amount of fussing. "Are you sure you'll be alright all alone here?" he'd asked, and Ava had simply sighed.

"Yes, just like every other day. Honestly, Jackson, I am not made of porcelain."

"Ava you know I'm just worried about you."

"Well, you'd needn't be. Do you think I wasn't able to survive before I met you? If you think that, I've got news for you. I've lived with this injury for thirteen years now, and believe it or not, I was not wrapped in cotton wool for all those years."

He'd placed his hat on his head and headed out the door in silence. Ava had wanted to apologize for snapping, but had kept quiet and let him go in peace.

She'd felt restless for the rest of the morning, unable to

concentrate on her usual daily chores, and bothered more than usual by the heat of the Californian sun. There was something else that was bothering her though; it was something she hadn't really experienced before. A tugging, gnawing feeling. Boredom. She felt bored. She was tired of being shut up indoors while her husband was off running the mines.

She made a decision: she was going to surprise him down at the mines. She figured this would have a double benefit. It would give her something to do, while allowing Jackson to see that she wasn't so helpless she had to spend all her time indoors. It would be a bit of work getting all the way down to the mine site, but she could manage it.

A bit of preparation was required. She'd need the right boots, of course, for such a long walk, and she'd need to take her cane. She preferred to do without it when possible, but a three mile trek would require a little assistance. She hunted all over the house for the cane, unable to locate it.

Had Jackson put it away somewhere? She had the bad feeling that he might have put it somewhere out of sight. Where he didn't have to look at it, to be reminded of her handicap. When she had thoughts like this she felt a stab of bitterness, as the memories of thirteen years earlier came flooding back to her. The way her fiancé had looked at her on the day they were supposed to wed.

She knew in an ideal world that Jackson Abrams never would have wanted to marry a woman like her. Back in a large city, he would have had his pick of the women, with his good looks and charm. She saw even in Gold Creek the way the other women reacted to him. *But in such a small community, he'd had fewer options: that was*

the only reason he'd sent for a mail order bride, she thought. Now he was stuck with a cripple, and he'd only come to resent me, if he hadn't already. The hidden cane was proof of that, she felt.

Ava caught herself and cursed herself for such judgmental thoughts. "There is no need to jump to such terrible conclusions," she told herself. "And no excuse to think so terribly of your own husband." No matter what else had happened, or what had taken place in the past, her and Jackson had stood before God and made a vow. It was her duty to be faithful to him, even in her thoughts about him.

She pulled open a drawer and found the cane laying there. She hadn't placed it in the drawer, so Jackson had definitely been the one to put it there. He was probably just trying to keep it safe, Ava told herself. Better to have it in a drawer than leaning against the door where she had left it.

Shaking her head to prevent any more bad thoughts from entering, she grabbed the cane out and tightened her bonnet around her head. She glanced down at the dress she was wearing. Still white, her preferred color, but made of cotton, not lace. It might get a little grubby on the walk, but it would be easy enough to clean. She leant down to shut the drawer when something caught her eyes.

Bank records. Narrowing her eyes, she pulled out the documents and scanned over them. Why had these been hidden down there in the bottom drawer? Surely Jackson's financial records were her concerns as well now? Had he been hiding these from her?

She pulled them out and read over them carefully. Debts. Money owed various parties. In the column where there should have been deposits, funds coming in, there had been nothing for months.

She dropped the documents with shaking hands and dropped onto a seat behind her, as her shaking leg threatened to give out from underneath her.

There were things about Jackson she'd been unsure about: his political ambitions, his overprotectiveness, his arrogant streak. But she'd never, till right at that moment, worried that he was a liar.

He'd promised her a secure future if she'd agreed to move to Gold Creek to be his wife. Ava was far from being a greedy woman, but the whole reason she'd left her ma behind in Philadelphia, to move to California, was to save them from poverty. And now it turned out that Jackson didn't even have a dime to his name?

She was in complete shock. The bank papers drifted from her hands as she sat there stunned, wondering what to do next. What way was there out of this? It felt as though the bottom had come out of all her plans.

Her ma. How on earth was Ava going to tell her she had no money to send her? She'd already promised to send money back to Philly at the end of the month. Now she would have nothing to give her.

Ava felt her head spinning and she leaned her head forward between her knees to allow the blood to rush back to her head. Now was not a time to lose grip. It was a time for decisions.

She pulled herself up and grabbed her cane. She was going to go down to the mines, to confront Jackson about the entire affair.

On the walk down to the mine, she rehearsed what she was going to say many times. She was not used to confrontation; she was from a family that kept things to themselves, without raising a fuss, or causing an argument. And maybe that hadn't been the right way to deal with issues, but it was how she'd been raised, and what she knew. Ava could tell her husband was far less conservative in nature, and would gladly get into a quarrel or disagreement if he needed to, but so far he had respected Ava's manner and kept things polite.

But now was not the time for being polite. Ava was practically fuming as she traipsed over the harsh land, her cane in her left hand, taking the weight of her damaged limb. The journey was a tough one, but there was no turning back now. She had to stop for breath and to give her arm a rest at roughly the half way point.

To her immense surprise, she saw a man rushing towards her. He was so lost in his own affairs that he practically ran into her before he stopped and noticed her.

"Oh, hello ma'am," he said, taking his hat off and bowing slightly. "My apologies. I didn't see you there."

She shyly looked away from the man, whom she didn't recognize.

"I'm Horton," he introduced himself.

The name rang a bell. She'd heard Jackson mention him a few times. Not in such kind terms, if she recalled. The two men were rivals of some sort, as far as she'd been able to gather. She often tuned out when the topic turned to politics.

But she knew a little about the struggle between them: whereas

Jackson had been considered the unofficial 'leader' of the settlement, Horton had been keen to make things more official, and wished to appoint himself as Marshall of the town, establishing proper law enforcement. Jackson was of the opinion that all of that could wait until the town had established itself.

"I'm Ava," she replied quietly, not sure she should be talking to the man. According to her husband, Horton was not a man of upstanding morals, and wasn't to be fully trusted. Still, she didn't wish to be rude. She hoped he'd place his hat back on and be quickly on his way, but he lingered for a moment, asking her questions.

"You're Jackson Abrams' new wife, ain't ya?" he asked, looking her up and down.

She nodded, self-consciously moving the cane behind her back.

"What ya got there?" he asked, peering behind her. Now she really wished the conversation could come to a halt.

"A cane, to assist me," was the plain answer she gave. *Please, no more questions*, she silently pleaded. She was beginning to regret her trip outside. Maybe Jackson had been right; she should have kept herself safe indoors.

"Assist ya?" he asked, pursing his lips. "What do you need that for? You ain't got a lame leg, do ya?"

Ava felt her cheeks blush and she bent her head down so that her bonnet shaded her eyes. Who was this rude man who asked so many questions? No stranger on the streets of Philadelphia would ever stop her like this to ask such questions.

Not sure how to answer, she looked away and adjusted her cane so that she could keep on walking.

"Hey, where ya going?" the man asked. "Not down to the mines, are you?"

"Why, yes I am," Ava replied, with a little bit of indignation this time. She had a right to go down there, didn't she? This man was speaking as though the mines were none of her business when they very much were her business - her livelihood, and the livelihood of the only family she had left depended on the mines' success. Of course, she should go down there and see what was going on.

"I'd be careful if I were you then, miss," he said, putting his hat back on his head and shrugging.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much. Even down at a mine."

"Not this one. You can't." He raised an eyebrow. "And it ain't got nothing to do with your leg. That mine is about to collapse."

With that, he gave her a sly grin, then turned and scurried off, leaving Ava there in an even greater state of shock. Collapse? She spun around, her white skirt picking up dust in the rough terrain as she squinted in the direction of the mine. Now, she really had to see it for herself.

* * *

"Ava!" Jackson cried out. "What are you doing down here!"

It had taken her the better part of two hours to finally make it

down to the gold mine on the creek bed, and she was exhausted from the effort. But before she finally collapsed, she had to ask,

"Is it true Jackson?"

"Is true what?" He rushed over to catch her before she fell to the ground. "Ava you shouldn't have come out here."

She tried to stand up on her own, brushing him off. "I can come out to wherever I want, can't I? Or am I a prisoner in that house?"

"Well, of course you can come and go as you please. That's not what I mean." Jackson looked around him in dismay. This was not the day he wanted Ava to see the mine. Not with all the drama, first with Joe, and then Horton sniffing around.

"So there must be another reason you don't want me down here then," Ava said, trying to keep her balance while surveying the state of the mine. She didn't see anything that looked particularly hazardous, but then again, she'd never seen a real gold mine before. It looked secure enough to her untrained eye. Perhaps Horton had just been stirring up trouble.

"What other reason?" Jackson asked, still trying to get Ava to sit down. "Please Ava, rest your leg."

"Will you please stop going on about my leg?" she asked. "And tell me the truth about this mine, Jackson."

He gulped. "What truth?"

"I know you haven't made a profit from this venture yet, Jackson," Ava stated, trying to keep her voice steady. "I saw the bank

statements." If she allowed emotion to creep in, if she let herself think about her ma back at home, relying on the money being sent to her, then she might start to cry. She wasn't ready to be that vulnerable. And she wanted to have a calm, reasonable discussion with Jackson about the matter. As long as he could be honest with her, that is.

"Ava," he said, chuckling, shaking his head. "Don't worry about all that." He waved a hand as if everything was sunny and fine. "Those are old statements! There is plenty of gold in this mine and plenty of money coming in for us, for the town, and...", he said, placing a hand on her arm, "for your mama. You don't need to worry about this."

"Oh." Ava furrowed her brow and tried to remember if she'd looked for a date on the bank records. Perhaps not. "So you've found gold since then?"

"Loads of it," he said, with confidence, though she thought she caught the look of something in his eye.

"And there'll be money to send to mama at the end of the month?"

"Plenty," he said. "I promise."

Ava took a deep breath and nodded, before finally taking a seat. "I'm sorry. I might have overreacted."

He sat down next to her in the shade. "Don't concern yourself over it. I understand why you were worried. Still, I wish you didn't trouble yourself by coming all the way out here." As he sat beside her, he gave a worried glance at her leg, trying to shield his action from her.

Oh Ava, he thought, why have you pushed yourself in this way? He

wished she'd just stayed in the house, though he was hesitant to say just that. He'd found himself more and more worried, during the past few weeks, that Ava was not physically fit enough for life in the rough mining town, and this seemed to confirm his suspicions. He hated to see the struggle on her face, and the strain in her body.

"Well, I wanted the fresh air as well," Ava said.

He nodded. "I'm glad you can finally see the place, then," he gazed ahead, not meeting her eye.

"Jackson...", she started, unsure of whether or not she should ask a further question. She'd already accused her husband of one untruth, could she risk another?

"Yes?" he asked.

"The mine...it isn't going to collapse, is it?" Again she tried to keep her voice strong and steady, but this time she could hear the waver enter.

He gave another soft, low chuckle. "No, of course not. What makes you think that, Ava?"

She shook her head and smiled at him softly. "Nothing. I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

* * *

That night, as Ava watched her husband make his preparations for bed, battening down the hatches, blowing out the candles, Ava sat still in her rocking chair and noticed the distance between them. It saddened her, and guilt tugged at her heart as she thought over their

conversation from that day. She wanted to believe her husband, wanted to trust him, but something about his words had felt so empty and hollow.

"Please God," she prayed, silently. "Send me a sign that I should remain in Gold Creek."

* * *

THE FIGHT

* * *

Gold Creek, Fall, 1849, two weeks later

The final day of the month arrived, and Ava waited anxiously for Jackson to return from the gold mine. She knew her Ma was relying on the money, and she'd put off asking Jackson about it for long enough. All week, she'd wanted to broach the subject, but hadn't wished to appear as though she was pushing him for it. Money was still a delicate subject for her, and one she felt shy talking about, even with her husband. But the time had come. She needed to ask Jackson where the money was.

Before he arrived, Ava sat down to pray, to ask for strength to get through the difficult conversation, and for grace and mercy from God, asking him to please provide for them. Her nerves were calmed a little, but she still stood anxiously waiting for her husband to come up the long drive to their home.

Jackson walked in through the door, his boots, shirt, and even hair thick with dust. Ava rushed over to the door as fast as she could, without her cane, to see what was wrong. "What's happened?" she asked. "You're covered in all manner of dirt and leaves, Jackson."

He shook himself off onto the floor as Ava looked on in dismay at the mess. She almost wanted to scold him to tell him that he could have at least shaken himself off outside, but she restrained herself.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said quietly, pushing past her.

"Jackson! Did something happen at the mine? Did it...was there

an accident or something?"

He spun around, his eyes angry. "I've told you a hundred times, Ava! The mine is not going to collapse! That is the end of it, okay?"

"It's not the end of it though, is it?" Ava asked, placing her hands on her hips. She'd been hoping to confront her husband without the need to raise her voice, or have matters degenerate into a fight, but he'd come home in such a rotten mood and that now seemed impossible. If he was going to be short with her, then she had no choice but to be blunt back.

"Where is the money, Jackson?"

"I've told you Ava, it's coming!"

"It's coming?" she asked, aghast. She took a step backwards, and almost tumbled over. Steading herself on the table, she continued on. "This is the last day of the month, Jackson. This is the day I need to send the money back to Mama. She's counting on it. You promised Jackson! You promised!" Hot, large tears spilled down her cheeks in spite of her best efforts to contain them. She couldn't believe what was happening. How could Jackson let her down like this?

Jackson's face softened at the sight of Ava's tears. The anger drained away as he took a step towards her and tried to embrace her. "Ava, please don't cry."

She turned her face away, ashamed of her emotions. "I don't mean to cry. I'm just thinking about Mama, back in Philly, about how she has no one else to rely on...how she's relying on me, and how I'm letting her down." With that, Ava broke down in sobs, unable to hold

back any longer.

"Ava..." Jackson took her into his big strong arms and tried to comfort her. "I'm sorry. I will get the money for you tomorrow. I promise."

"How?" Ava asked, still weeping.

"I'll figure out a way," Jackson said. "Shh, please don't worry any longer."

* * *

"Where did you get it from?" Ava demanded to know. "The money, Jackson. It couldn't have just fallen out of the sky!"

"Don't worry about where I got the money from," Jackson said, as though he wanted no further argument on the matter. "Just know that it's all taken care of. The money has been sent home to your Ma."

"You didn't do anything...illegal did you?"

"Of course I didn't! How could you ask such a thing!"

"Because..." Ava said, almost stamping her foot on the ground. "You have your head in the cloud, Jackson; it seems at times! Perhaps you've come up with some sort of short-sighted, silly scheme, or you've done something without thinking things through..."

"Oh, is that what you think of me?"

Ava tried to think of a way to speak delicately on the matter. "Sometimes, Jackson, you just see what is on the surface."

He frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

She glanced down at her left automatically before she could even think, and immediately tried to hide the action. This was the last topic that she wished to get into an argument about.

Ava caught the catch in Jackson's throat as he swallowed before speaking. "You think I am shallow even...when it comes to you?" he asked.

She shook her head lightly, but she looked away before catching his eye. "No - no, I didn't mean."

"Ava, if I've ever reacted...with caution regarding your impediment, it's only because I worry that you are having difficulty here in Gold Creek."

Her eyes snapped up and caught onto his. "Oh, so you do feel pity for me then?"

"Not pity. Just worry."

She felt her cheeks flushing hot as she tried to turn her face so that he couldn't see her. But without her cane in hand she had trouble turning without stumbling. Looking at the floor, she said, "You mean worried about what others are thinking, and saying?"

"I only worry about what they are thinking and saying if it upsets you!"

"Yeah right," Ava snapped back. "You worry that it reflects badly on you to have a crippled wife. You can't be the perfect town leader with me on your arm!"

Now Ava glanced up and noticed that it was time for Jackson's face to flush red. "If that's what you think then I have nothing more to say on the matter." He turned and started to walk towards the door, grabbing his hat off the table as he went.

"Jackson!" Ava called out. "We need to talk about this, not just leave it on such a bad note!"

"We'll talk later," Jackson replied, without looking back, shutting the door roughly behind him.

* * *

Ava sat herself down in the Church pew and leant her head forward to pray.

"God, please put peace in Jackson's heart. And give me the good grace to forgive him for any of his flaws."

As Ava sat in silence, the wood of the pew cool on her forehead, the hot Summer breeze blowing in from the back of the Church, she heard gentle footsteps walking up behind her.

"Jackson?" she asked, looking up quickly behind her.

"Sorry, just me." Clarabelle walked down the aisle, pink long skirt tugging along the floor as she went, strawberry blonde hair tied up modestly under a white bonnet.

"Oh," Ava said, straightening herself up, a bit embarrassed at having been spotted. She wasn't sure what to say to Clarabelle in such a setting.

Clarabelle came and sat beside her on a pew, leafing through a bible in front of her. "You know, you should join me and the other ladies for bible study some time."

Ava glanced over at her unsurely, not entirely trusting the other women. "Okay," she replied, then smiled. "That would be nice."

Clarabelle smiled back at her. "I noticed you've had a bit of a hard time around here since you arrived."

Ava turned her head. "Not too bad," she replied.

"That Jackson of yours is awful nice though, isn't he," Clarabelle continued on, absentmindedly, still leafing through her bible. "I bet he makes things easy on you."

"Yes," Ava replied simply, looking down at her palms. "He does."

* * *

Ava was already nodding off in her chair when Jackson came in.

"Ava?" he asked gently, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes, shaking her head. "Oh, I was falling asleep I think." She looked up at him lazily and smiled. "Are you okay? Where have you been?"

"Just down at the mine."

"At this time?"

"There's a lot to be done. Anyway," he said, taking a seat beside

her. "Don't worry about that now. Ava, I'm so sorry about before."

"Shh," she said. "I'm the one who should be sorry. You got the money for us, and I threw it back in your face, accusing you of doing something bad to get it. I shouldn't have spoken like that."

"I should have had the money for you long before today," he replied, with some regret. "Ava, I brought you all the way out here to California, with the promise that you would be provided for, and I should have made sure of that."

"You did make sure of it in the end." Ava reached over and gingerly took Jackson's hand. He looked down at it and nodded. "I accused you of having your head in the clouds, but your ambition and drive is a good thing, really. It makes you work hard, not be lazy. You're even down at the mine after dark!"

He stroked her hand with his own. "You were right though Ava. I need to face up to reality sometimes as well." He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "And you're here now, to help me keep my feet on the ground."

* * *

AN ACCIDENT

* * *

Gold Creek, Late Summer, 1849

"You're looking bright and cheerful today," Jackson commented, admiring Ava in her new long red dress.

"It's not too ostentatious, is it?" she asked, spinning around.

"Not at all. I think you look lovely."

Ava stared at her husband for a second and smiled. It really did seem like things were turning around for her in Gold Creek. The gold mine was booming, she was making new friends at last, and she and Jackson were getting along better than they ever had. She was even starting to think...No, she had to keep those thoughts at bay. If she dared to let herself think that Jackson might actually fall in love with her...then she'd only wind up getting hurt. They may have been getting along better, but she still caught the look in his eye that he thought she didn't notice. The one that always looked disappointed.

No, Jackson wanted perfection; he'd been quite clear about that. And she wasn't perfect.

Still, she had things to look forward to now. Jackson had provided for her and her ma, leaving Ava's mind at ease, finally. She felt as though she was walking around lighter now, knowing that her ma was taken care of.

"Where are you off to today then?" Jackson asked. "You must have a special reason for dressing up?"

Ava nodded, feeling the butterflies in her stomach. "I'm meeting up with some of the ladies from Church, for bible study. I think we might be becoming friends," she beamed.

"I'm pleased for you," Jackson said, standing up and giving her a peck on the cheek. "Well, I'm needed off down at the mine, so I need to be off."

"Of course," Ava said. "I'll see you back here in time for dinner."

He smiled at her before taking off out the front door. As Ava stood, admiring her new red dress in the mirror, she tried not to read too much into Jackson's actions. When he'd kissed her on the cheek, she still felt...a reservation from him. As though the action was simply him going through the motions, playing the role of the husband, doing what he was supposed to do, but not with any real feeling. Sometimes, she felt as though he couldn't wait to get away from her to get to the gold mine.

She told herself not to worry, that it didn't matter anyway. She hadn't come to Gold Creek for romance. She'd come to take care of her family. Now that she was doing just that, she could relax a little. There was no sense filling her head with ridiculous ideas about her and Jackson. It was what it was. If God had any greater plans for them, then He'd let those plans be known in due course. She needed to stop fussing and fretting.

Smiling at her reflection, she noticed that there was more color in her cheeks than there had ever been before. She barely recognized herself without her trademark ivory complexion. Her skin was still fine and creamy, but there was now a pleasant rosy pink to her cheeks, and she was sure of a sparkle in her eyes that she hadn't seen

in a long time.

* * *

As she approached the church doors, she made the decision to leave her cane outside. The women at church had been polite to her and not been nose-y about her handicap, but she still didn't want to draw any more attention to it than was necessary.

She lay the delicate object against the white walls of the church and straightened up her dress. She was a little nervous, but looking forward to the occasion to socialize. Although Jackson was trying his best, she did miss the company of other friends, and the loneliness had started to weigh on her. As she was a little early, she wondered if she should wait outside for the other ladies to show. *No*, she thought. *It is better to get myself settled and comfortable before they get here. If they see me struggling, they will only feel pity for me.*

It was then that she heard the strains of the women's voices coming from the other side of the church walls. *Oh, they are already here*, she thought. She wondered if she should take her cane in after all, or if she could manage without it. She didn't wish for the others to see her struggling.

While debating what to do, she heard one of the women, Miss Clarabelle talking loudly. "She just doesn't seem...*right* for the town somehow, does she? So prim and proper."

The other women murmured in agreement, while Ava's heart began to quick, the blood rising to her face. Surely, they couldn't be talking about her, could they? They'd all made it look like they were her friends, to her face. Surely, they wouldn't be so two-faced as to

Speak like this behind her back?

"And she just doesn't seem right for Jackson!" Another woman exclaimed.

Ava grabbed her cane, fumbling it in her hands in her haste to get away. Her hand began to shake as she tried to steady herself on the uneven ground. Right then she longed for the carefully paved roads of Philadelphia, not the uneven, unpaved so-called 'roads' of this two-horse town.

Oh, why did I ever come to this place? she thought, her head hot with the embarrassment of what she had overheard. *People here have no manners at all! How can they judge me, without even knowing anything about me? "Prim and proper," they said! Well, if I may appear reserved, it is for very good reason! What am I supposed to do? Get down in the dirt and dig with the miners?*

She stopped and took a few deep breaths. Her new dress was tighter than she was used to, and the heat was getting to her, along with the flush of hurt she'd felt back at the church. She didn't want to let her hurt and anger take over. *Please God, she prayed. Give me the grace to show forgiveness to the women for what they've said about me.*

The church door opened, and she turned quickly, wishing to get away. She grabbed her cane, and took off down the lane so fast that she didn't see the man coming towards her in the other direction.

"Why, missy? What's happened?" Horton asked, taking in the sight of Ava's distress.

"Oh, nothing," she said, struggling to gain her composure. She

certainly hadn't meant to run right into the man, especially not at such a moment.

"I can tell something is wrong my dear. What is it?" he asked, more kindly this time. "I don't like to see such a pretty thing as you are upset like this."

She glanced up at him. Pretty? No one had ever called her that before. Averting her gaze again, she simply said, "I will be alright, no need to fuss over me."

Horton glanced over her shoulder at the church that stood in the background. "Nothing happened in there, did it? It wasn't those women from the church group, was it? That have got you so upset?"

"Oh no, it's nothing like that." Ava didn't wish to speak badly of anyone else, no matter what they had said about her first. Besides, she still didn't trust this Horton fellow, but it was nice to have someone show some concern for her in this way and to say that she was pretty.

He put a hand out and touched her on the arm. Ava looked down at it in alarm and quickly pulled her arm back. Flustered, she tried to look for a way to escape when, in the distance, she looked up and saw Jackson staring at them.

"Jackson, I thought you were down at the mines today," Ava said, straightening up as her husband approached.

"Get out of here Horton," he said roughly.

"I'm just concerned about your wife," Horton replied, with indignation. "The poor thing is upset."

"I'm okay, really," Ava spoke up, quietly.

"What's wrong Ava?" Jackson said, turning back to her.

"I really don't wish to speak about it. Can we just return home, please?"

Jackson turned back to Horton and commanded him to scram. Horton tried to protest, but Jackson stood up to him and told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to get out of Jackson's sight.

"What was going on between you?" Jackson asked Ava, once Horton had scurried off down the road, round the corner, into the bar.

Ava shook her head in shock. "Why, nothing of course! What are you saying?"

"He looked like he was getting close to you, Ava."

She was horrified. "I accidentally ran into him as I was leaving the church. I wasn't watching where I was going! All he was doing was asking if I was alright. Which is more than I can say for you right now! Of course you don't care if I am truly okay, you're just worried about how things may look to others!"

He glanced around the town to make sure they weren't making a scene. "Well, this looks incredibly bad to others Ava! Right in the middle of the town like this, talking with Horton, letting him put a hand on your arm."

"Letting? Jackson I can't believe that you would say something like that to me."

Jackson stopped speaking for a moment, needing to stop to draw breath as he was so furious.

"How could you possibly accuse me of something like that?" Ava asked, the tears springing to her eyes.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, I'm just asking, Ava."

"So you don't trust me at all then, is that it?"

"Ava I just want to know what you were doing talking to Horton like that. You don't understand, this is a very small community, and people will talk."

"You think I don't know about gossip, about how scandals can destroy lives?" Ava asked. "I know all too well Jackson. You don't need to lecture me. If you thought even for a second that I would do anything like what you're accusing me of, then you really don't know me at all."

Jackson was silent for a full minute. "To be honest, I don't feel like I know you very well Ava. After all this time, you still haven't allowed yourself to open up to me at all."

She was taken aback even further. "Jackson, I've been as open and honest with you as I've...well, as I've felt able to be, under the circumstances!" She thought about what the women in the church had said about her prim and proper manner. Did even her husband think the same of her? That she was so cold and reserved? She had her reasons for her actions. And if she'd been slow in opening up to Jackson, it was only because he seemed so concerned with perfection, and the way things looked on the outside, that she wasn't sure she

trusted that she could be vulnerable with him. If anything, it was he who was reserved with her; holding things back, like the financial situations and lying to her about where he'd been going that day.

"I'm going home," Ava stated firmly, digging her cane into the ground. "You can come with me if you please, or stay here so the rest of the town can gawk at you!"

* * *

Jackson didn't come back to the home till later that night. Once Ava's anger had cooled, she began to worry if he was alright, and when he finally came in the door after sun down, she felt the relief flood her body.

He laid his hat down on the table. "I'm sorry about before, Ava," he said, taking a seat. "There was more going on than I had explained to you."

Ava nodded, willing and grateful to hear an explanation from him. She took a seat across from him. "What was going on then?" she asked gently. When his response wasn't immediate, she pressed a little. "What were you doing in town when you said you were going to the mine?"

"I didn't want to worry you Ava, but I wasn't feeling too well. I'd intended to head straight to the mine, but decided to head into town to see Doc instead."

"Oh no..." Ava said, reaching her hand out instinctively to grab Jackson's hand. "Are you feeling ill still? What are the symptoms?"

He squeezed her hand back and Ava felt warmth in her stomach. "I'm much better now. He gave me some medicine to take and it seems to have done the trick. Honestly, I just didn't want you to worry if it turned out to be nothing."

"I understand," Ava replied. "But you can share things like this with me. I'm your wife after all, Jackson. I want to know what your troubles are so I can share them." She stopped speaking for a moment, before adding, "You know I don't like it when you keep things from me."

"You have enough to worry yourself with Ava, that's all."

She brought her hand back, breaking the embrace. "I see. You think I can't handle knowing things. You think I am very fragile. Well, I'm not. I think I can handle knowing that my husband is feeling a little under the weather!"

He sighed. "Ava I didn't..."

"So is that the only reason you overreacted so much to seeing me talking with that man? Because you were feeling ill?"

"That's one of the reasons," Jackson uttered quietly.

"One of the reasons? What else are you keeping from me?"

Jackson swallowed before going on to explain. "Horton is the person I borrowed the money from, for your Ma."

Ava pushed her chair back, her mouth dropping open. "Why'd he lend you money for? Jackson, I don't understand."

"Ava, it's a long story. He agreed to give me the loan if I helped to establish him as Marshal for the town."

Ava was horrified. She'd had enough of these sort of political dealings back in Philadelphia. "So that's where you got the money from, then?" Ava said, shaking her head. "Jackson, I can't believe I am hearing this."

"What was I supposed to do, Ava? You were desperate, and I couldn't let you down..."

"You have let me down though! Don't you see that?"

"Ava, I am trying my absolute best to be a good husband to you, despite all the difficulties..." he stopped when he caught the expression on her face.

"All the difficulties?" she asked, her voice shaking. "I see. Being married to me is a huge difficulty. Well, if I am such a burden for you to manage, then maybe I'll just go!"

"Ava I didn't mean it like that. I don't mean to say that you are difficult, just the circumstances we find ourselves in..."

"I know exactly what you mean." She pushed her chair in roughly and took off out of the room, struggling without her cane, but refusing to let that stop her.

"Ava where are you going? We're not done talking."

She stopped and turned back around to him slowly. She felt a stillness enter her and she spoke plainly. "With all that has happened today, Jackson, I feel as though I have come to a decision. You're

right. And the women at the church were right. I don't belong here; I don't fit at all. I've been fooling myself all this time that things would work out, and that ours could ever be a true marriage, one where you love me. You look at me, Jackson, and all you see is my limp, and my fragility, and everything I can't do. You said it yourself - the difficulties. Well, this is the final straw for me. If you've obtained money in a less than honest way, I'd be better off going back to Philadelphia and taking care of my Mama in my own way."

After her long speech, she waited, breathless, for a response, assuming that Jackson would tell her she was wrong, that he needed her there in Gold Creek, that she was talking foolishly, that he couldn't bear to see her leave.

Instead, he looked up at her sadly, and nodded.

"Perhaps you're right," he said quietly.

* * *

JACKSON TAKES ILL

* * *

Gold Creek, end of Summer, 1849

It was the longest, darkest night of Ava's life as she stayed up late into the evening packing up her belongings. As she picked up the red dress, the memories from the church came flooded back, hitting her in the stomach. Yes, she was making the right decision. She'd asked for a sign from God to show her whether she belonged in Gold Creek or if she should leave, and she'd received one. There was no point in blaming the women, or holding a grudge against them. Their words had simply confirmed what she'd known for some time: that she was an odd fit in this rough mining town. An impossible fit. Everything here was so foreign to her. From the weather, to the people, to the different manners...No, it was better she return home.

What was left for her in Gold Creek? She shoved the red dress into her bag roughly without even bothering to fold it properly. With her white and blue lace dress, she was a little more careful. The dress brought back memories of the first time she had met Jackson at the station. She almost laughed sweetly to think of how he'd seemed nervous to meet her, and how kind he had been to her that day.

How much hope she had kept hidden. Because, deep down, she had hoped, on that day - the day of their wedding - that Jackson could love her. But that hope had never panned out. Yes, he'd been kind, and taken care of her when he'd had to, but she always felt as though he was at arm's length. The way he looked at her with - she hated to even think the word - pity. He pitied her, and treated her like a fragile flower who was going to snap off her stem if anything touched her.

And when she'd told him she wanted to leave, he'd agreed. Hadn't even tried to convince her to stay. That hurt more than anything.

* * *

It was the middle of the night, with her bags almost packed, that Ava heard the sound of something breaking coming from the kitchen.

"Jackson?" she called out, from the sitting room. When there was no reply, she assumed it must have been an empty jar or a vase toppling over, and decided not to investigate if she didn't have to. Her injury was playing up, so no sense in making unnecessary movements.

With the last of her belongings packed, Ava stood up and blew out the candle, before heading towards the kitchen. She intended to make sure there was no glass laying around on the floor before she left. Despite everything, she wouldn't want Jackson to wake up in the morning before the sun had risen, and to cut his feet in broken glass.

There, in the pale moonlight coming in through the window, she saw him lying on the floor: Jackson, still, as though the life had completely drained from him.

Ava dropped to her knees besides him. In that moment, there was no pain in her leg at all, and she seemed to move easily as she bent over to check his pulse, noticing that there was a broken jug lying next to him on the cold ground. He must have knocked it over as he'd fallen. Must have been trying to get a drink of water before he'd collapsed.

She didn't have very much experience in nursing, but Ava could tell he still had a pulse, was still breathing. She reached a palm

against his forehead. He was boiling up, his forehead sweaty. A bad fever had taken hold. Ava looked around desperately, trying to figure out how she could get Jackson up off the ground on her own. She managed to get herself up by using the table to hoist her, but she had no idea how she was supposed to lift a 140 pound man in her condition?

She began to breathe heavily, a panic overtaking her. Oh, why had Jackson ever sent for her to be his wife? He was right to be disappointed in what he'd gotten. He deserved a wife who could at least take care of him when he was deadly ill, not some kind of invalid who was useless in an emergency.

Ava clasped her hands in a prayer motion and began to pray. *Please God, show me a way to help Jackson. Please forgive me for my intentions to leave him. I promise I will stay, and do my best to be a good wife to him, if you will please spare his life. Please show me the way, God.*

* * *

The long night continued, as Ava stayed up till dawn, keeping Jackson's forehead cool with water and towels, until finally Doc was able to arrive just after sun break.

"The poor man...," Doc murmured, helping Ava move him to the bed.

"Thank you," Ava said. "I was no use on my own; I'm afraid."

"Nonsense," Doc whispered, as Jackson lay, dead asleep, beside them. "You've been more than useful, looking after him all night, keeping his fever low. He would be in a far worse state if you hadn't

known what to do."

Ava glanced over at Jackson, worried. "Do you know what's wrong with him, Doc?"

Doc scratched his chin. "Hard to say. Could be scarlet fever; I'm afraid."

"Oh gosh," Ava said, bringing her hands up to her face. "He could be out of action for weeks! What about the mine? Who will take care of things down there?"

Doc reached over and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps, that responsibility will lay on your shoulders for a short while child." He smiled at her kindly. "I know you've got it in you."

* * *

Finally, after two weeks had passed, Jackson was able to open his eyes to look at his wife. It was through fresh eyes that he now saw her.

"Ava...", he said, his face lighting up in a weak smile.

"Shh," she said, holding out the spoon of soup for him to sip on. "You need to eat something Jackson. You're practically fading away in this bed."

He groaned. "The mine.."

"Don't worry about all of that. I've taken care of everything," she replied matter of factly. "The mine is running better than it ever has been."

His voice was croaky. "You've taken care of it? But how?"

"See? I'm not as weak as you've thought I was," Ava said, chuckling a little as she continued to spoon the soup into his mouth. "I've been down there every day, overseeing things."

"What about your leg? How have you been managing?" His face was contorted into concern, as he thought about Ava making the three mile journey there and back every day.

"My leg's actually started feeling better," she said, thoughtfully, putting the spoon down as she mulled over the matter. "It's the strangest thing. You know what? I think the warm weather out here has made the world of difference. As long as I don't overstrain myself, the exercise seems to be good for me as well. I'd been so used to being closed off indoors, thinking that's what was best for me. It turns out it was just the opposite."

Jackson reached over and grasped her hand in his. "Ava...I'm just remembering that terrible fight we had before I got ill." He opened his eyes wide and stared at her as though he was seeing her properly for the first time. "You were...you were about to leave, weren't you?" He laid his head back in the pillow and shut his eyes tight, wincing at the memory. "I told you to go...," he murmured, with remorse.

When he opened his eyes again, Ava could see the sorrow and regret swimming in them. "Hush now," she said. "None of that matters."

"Ava, I never really meant for you to leave. I never wanted you to, my love, you need to know that. I was just worried about you here in Gold Creek. Wondering if you could really cope. I didn't want to have

a tougher life out here than you needed to. I thought, if being back in Philly was the best thing for you, then I should just let you go. Please know that in my heart, I never wanted you to actually leave me."

She nodded. This was all she wanted to hear. These are the words she'd wanted to hear that night when she'd started packing her bags. They were now empty again, her belongings returned to their rightful positions in their house.

"Ava, there's still something I need to tell you. I've realized that 'being perfect' doesn't mean everything. Things are put into perspective when you become so ill. Look at me lying here, I can't be perfect when I'm sick. No one can be perfect. And nothing can ever be perfect, can it?"

Ava shook her head. "There's no such thing as perfect, my love."

"I still can't believe that you've been taking care of the mine all on your own, Ava." He beamed with pride as he looked at her. "I see now that you are very capable and that I've been treating you like you are too feeble. Now I see your strength, Ava. Laying here now, looking at you, I can see you're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Now these were the words Ava had longed to hear for so long. She felt as though she might just burst with all the happiness she was feeling.

"Can you forgive me for being so pig-headed? So foolish?" Jackson asked, pleading with her.

"Of course I can, my love. Of course."

After the longest time, Ava was finally starting to feel at home at Gold Creek. Life in Philly now seemed like a distant, cold memory. Looking after Jackson had brought them closer than she'd ever imagined it could. For once in her life, she'd started to feel useful, as if she had a purpose. And sitting there besides her now recovered husband, she thanked God that he was still alive, and that they had this second chance to start over again.

Yes, things were staring to look just about perfect. Ava even let herself hope, for a moment, that there *could* be such a thing as perfect. What else would you call this wonderful new life she'd found for herself?

* * *

A DISASTER

* * *

Cold Creek, start of Winter, 1850

As the New Year dawned in Gold Creek, Ava was surprised how warm California could be in the Winter. Reaching down to rub her old family injury, she marveled at how well she was thriving in her new environment.

The love had never been stronger between Ava and Jackson, and the unhappy times had faded away with the changing of the year. As far as Ava was concerned, all the old miseries and resentments had faded away. She'd forgiven, and almost forgotten. Her days were spent, happy and jolly, as she alternated between tending to the house, going to Church and socializing, and overseeing the mine. Jackson had made a full recovery, but having run the mine in his absence, she no longer wanted to go back to feeling useless. She enjoyed her time out there, loved the feeling of the sun on her cheeks, and the way the air filled her lungs, refreshing her. Plus, she enjoyed being involved in the running of the business, and the sense of purpose she gained from taking a hands on role.

Still, something troubled her about the way things were being run down at the creek. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

* * *

On this particular morning, Jackson offered his arm out for Ava to link hers through. "Let me know if you're not up for the walk," he said.

"To be honest, my leg hasn't been feeling that good the last day or

so..." Ava said, her face furrowed. Then, shaking her head, she looked up brightly and linked her arm through Jackson's for support. "But I'm sure it's going to be fine."

"Well, I trust your judgement in that matter," Jackson said, leaning over to give her a kiss on her forehead before she tied her bonnet to her head.

They took off slowly over the land. "You know, I've been thinking..." Jackson said, "that we should build a new home out here, to be closer to the creek."

"Why was the town built so far away from the creek in the first place?"

"Didn't seem so far at the time," Jackson stated. "But it's better to build the town a little away from the creek, just in case of flooding...or..." he trailed off.

"Or what?" Ava asked. They kept walking for a moment in silence. "Jackson, you're not still worried about the mine collapsing, are you? It's secure now, we saw to that. There's nothing to worry about now."

He remained silent for several paces. "Of course not."

* * *

"That's strange..." Jackson murmured.

"What is?" Ava asked, surveying the site. They were standing above the mine on the grassy plains, looking down into the pit.

"It's empty."

"You didn't give everyone the morning off, and forget about it, did you?" Ava teased. "You have been a little tired lately Jackson."

He shook his head and broke free of her, unlinking his arm from hers. "No, all the men should be down here well before now. They should have started at dawn."

"At DAWN?" Ava repeated, thinking that was very strange indeed. "Since when do you make your workers start at dawn, Jackson?" But he was already walking around the edge of the pit, peering in, trying to see what was going on.

Ava was still flummoxed, trying to figure out why the miners would have been starting so early in the morning. *Perhaps they've been pushed so hard they've decided to go on strike*, Ava thought to herself. She could hardly have blamed them.

"Oh no...," Jackson called out, pointing to the entrance of the tunnel down on the inside of the pit.

Ava leaned forward, trying to make out what he was pointing at. "The entrance?" she asked. "It looks...it looks like it's blocked. With rocks, and stones."

Jackson brought his hands up to his head, knocking his hat off behind him, onto the ground. "What have I done?" he murmured, turning to Ava, his eyes wild.

"Jackson tell me what's going on? You're frightening me."

"The entry way has collapsed...the miners are stuck in there."

Ava brought a gloved hand up to her mouth and gasped.

"Jackson...how! How has this happened? Everything was safe, and being run properly, wasn't it?"

He ignored her, more concerned with what was happening in the mine. "I've got to get down there, Ava!"

"Jackson, there's no sense putting your own life in danger! We need to go get help. We can get Doc, and some of the other men from the town..."

"There's no time for that Ava..." he tried to pull free from her as she clung onto his jacket, not wanting him to climb down into the pit, knowing that he might become trapped in rubble himself.

"Ava let me go!"

"I'm so mad, Jackson. How could you let this happen? People could get injured, just like I was! I know how difficult life can be following an accident Jackson! How could you not have considered the consequences? I really thought you'd changed; that you were starting to see that there were more things to worry about than just money and success."

"Ava this is not the time to argue. We need to get the rubble off the men trapped in there."

Ava pointed down to her aching limb. "How am I supposed to do that, Jackson? My leg is in great pain today! The worst it has ever been!"

Jackson's face fell. "Why on earth didn't you tell me, Ava? You let on that everything was fine when we left the house this morning."

"I didn't want you to think that I wasn't capable. Oh blast, now look what's happened."

Stomping past her angrily, Jackson uttered. "It would have been better if you'd just stayed at home. What use are you going to be out here?"

He climbed into the mine and began to shovel out the rock that was blocking the front entrance. From up above, Ava looked down into the pit in despair.

Flustered, Ava turned on her heel and stated, "Fine! I will go home if that's what you want!"

As she stepped to leave, her cane went flying out from underneath her, and the ground beneath her feet broke off, crumbling away beneath her feet. Her voiced came out in a shrill scream as she tumbled over the rock and dirt, falling with a thud onto the ground, as the rubble from up above came pouring down on top of her, her legs caught underneath the rocks and debris.

"AVA!" Jackson's voice was coarse and frantic as he ran over to her.

She lay lifeless for a moment as Jackson became more and more frantic. "AVA!" He shook her by the shoulders, checking for any sign of lift, before she lifted her dusty head and coughed.

"Jackson?" she croaked.

"Oh Ava...", he clasped her hand tightly. "Just hang on, I'll go get help."

She didn't let his hand go. "Please don't leave Jackson."

"Okay," he said, kneeling down next to her. "I won't leave you. Doc is due to come down here soon, anyway. We'll just have to wait a little longer."

* * *

"Ava, I promise that if, by the grace of God, you should get out alive, things will be different." He ran his coarse hand over her soft one, stroking her palm with his thumb. "Just hang on a bit longer my love. Just hang on."

"Jackson," she said weakly, looking up at him. "I'm feeling so tired..."

"I don't think it's a good idea to fall asleep, if you've hit your head."

She shook her head gently. "No, it's not my head that hurts. Jackson, it's my leg."

"Ava," he said, in a low, desperate whisper, "How could I have ever let this happen to you? If you are hurt...or," he hesitated before letting the next word out on a sorrowful gasp, "worse, then I will never ever forgive myself. Oh, I curse this stupid mine and everything it has put us through! I've been too ambitious. My rashness and foolhardiness has caused too much strain on the mine and the workers."

"Jackson, listen to me." Her voice came out husky and croaky, but she gripped Jackson's hand tightly to let him know that he was to take

what she was about to say seriously. "This isn't all your fault."

"What are you talking about Ava? Of course it is all my fault."

"No, it's not. I'm the one that pushed you, aren't I?" Though her voice was croaky, there was a catch in it, as though she were on the verge of tears as she spoke. "I put so much pressure on you to come up with the money for us."

"Shh...", Jackson said gently, almost laughing as he thought Ava's words were so silly. "You've done no such thing. If you ever pushed, it was only out of love for your ma. Never for selfish reasons, like mine were."

"Jackson?" She asked, looking up at him with her last bit of strength. "Am I going to be alright?"

He gripped her hand. "Of course you are Ava," he said soothingly. "Of course you are."

They stayed like for hours, praying together.

* * *

A NEW DAY DAWNS

* * *

Gold Creek, Winter, 1850

Although it felt to Ava as though the dawn would never break, eventually, blessedly, she gazed up from where she was lying to see the dawn coming up over the rocky horizon.

"Jackson?" she called, looking around for her husband. In the dark, she couldn't locate him in the mine. "Jackson?" she called again, though her voice was barely more than a croak. She tried to pull her leg free but the action was in vain. *Perhaps, he's gone for help*, Ava thought. She could barely get a sense of what had happened the night before. She must have drifted off while they'd been praying. Perhaps, Jackson had told her he was leaving, and she'd simply not heard him.

Her dry throat begged for a drink of water. Groggily, she tried to push herself up onto her elbows, tried to get a better look at what was going on around her. She remembered the trapped miners, wondered if Doc had ever made it down there. Everything was so hazy in her exhaustion and dehydration.

Just as she was about to lay her head back down, to fall into another deep sleep, she saw it - light reflecting off the sun; a gold, shiny metal. She reached a hand up and rubbed her eyes, thinking they must be deceiving her. Perhaps she was so thirsty she wasn't seeing properly, she thought. She reached out her hand to touch it, and felt the cool, bumpy metal under her hands.

Gold.

"Jackson!" Ava called out, her voice much stronger this time.

He jumped down into the pit in one swift movement. "Ava, there's men here to help now. We'll have you free in no time...", he stopped when he saw how gleefully she was looking at him.

"Ava, what's happened?" He was half-concerned she'd gone delirious with thirst or tiredness, otherwise there was no reason for her to be looking so happy after a night trapped under a pile of rocks. He knelt down beside her to get a better look. "Ava should I get Doc to take a good look at you?"

"Jackson I'm fine," she lowered her voice. And in a happy whisper she said, "Gold."

At long last, the miners, along with Ava, were rescued in turn.

As Jackson pulled Ava up, lifting her up so that she was over his shoulders, she asked, "Jackson, is everyone alright? No one was injured, were they?" Although her voice was weak, it held a deep concern. She couldn't bear to think of anyone going through what she'd been through, living with a permanent injury.

"Some cuts and bruises," Jackson said, reassuringly. "Nothing serious."

"You're telling me the truth, aren't you? Not just trying to spare my feelings?"

"From now on, I only tell you the truth Ava, I promise."

He sat her gently down on the ground, just temporarily while he surveyed the damage to the mine. "What are we going to do?" he murmured.

Ava looked up at him with bright eyes. "Now that we've got the gold, we've got the money to fix the mine up properly to make sure that it won't collapse, or damage the near-by farm land."

Jackson shook his head. "I think we need to use the money for other things; more important things." He cast a glance over his shoulder in the distance, towards the town of Gold Creek. "Everyone's been so patient with me, waiting for me to strike gold. It's time I paid them back. Did up the town, rebuild the shops, fix up the Church, etc." He then turned back to Ava. "Plus, this time, I need to be responsible. Put enough aside for us, and your Ma. Maybe even send for her to come here."

"Oh Jackson," Ava murmured, tears springing to her eyes. This time, they were happy tears. As her watery eyes sparkled, and her face crinkled up into a grin, Jackson reached down and pulled her to her feet, lifting her off the ground so that there was no strain on her feet, pulling her in to him for a kiss.

* * *

"How are you feeling?" Jackson asked, walking into the room with a hot cup of tea.

"Much better," she answered, sitting up, with her blanket still wrapped snugly around her. "Jackson isn't it all wonderful how it has

worked out for us?" She stopped talking when she saw the heavy furrow of his brow, as he crossed the room to sit next to her.

"Yes," he said distractedly, "it's all very wonderful..."

"What is it?" Ava asked, not tricked by his words. "You don't make it sound as though it's wonderful at all. What's troubling you?"

"Ah, it's nothing." He handed her the cup of tea and made sure she had a firm grip before he took his hand away.

"Jackson, you should know by this stage that our problems are shared. If something is troubling you, tell me what it is."

"I just can't figure out why you found that gold on that particular day, in that specific place. Just doesn't seem right..." he murmured, lost in thought.

Ava also became lost in her own musings. "Hmm...I guess I just got lucky. One of those things you can't explain."

"But why? Why, after months and months of mining, did nothing really turn up till just now?"

Ava put her cup down and reached over to take Jackson's hand. "There's no sense in wondering about our good fortune now, is there? It's just time to be grateful, to thank God for showing us the way when he did. Jackson, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about now." She leaned over and rested her head against his shoulder, closed her eyes tight, and nodded off to sleep.

The news came the following day. It was up to Jackson to deliver the news at the town meeting of the Gold Creek residents.

Jackson took to the make-shift podium and took his hat off as he addressed the town's folk. "Thank you all for being here this evening to allow me to explain things to you."

"What's going on, Jackson?" Doc called out, while the other residents nodded and called out cries of "yeah" and "tell us."

From the side of the stage, Ava looked out over the small crowd, picking up the feelings of unrest coming from them. There was one notable absence in the crowd: Horton.

Ava took a deep breath and turned back to her husband, who explained the scandal to the rest of the town.

"He was taking the money from the mine - stealing it all for himself!"

There was a shocked hush, before the residents let out a sea of gasps and cries. "But how? What has happened to him now? He's to be punished, isn't he?"

Jackson nodded, holding his hands up, "Yes, he will be punished at the decision of the town. As we all see fit."

As Jackson explained to them all of Horton's misdoings, there were more murmurs and gasps. But most of all, there was an out-pouring of apologies towards Jackson.

"We're all so sorry for putting so much doubt on you," Miss Clarabelle said, earnestly as she could, her face blushing slightly as

she spoke. "It wasn't fair after all, was it?"

Some people were not quite so easily hushed though. There were still concerns present. "You should have known what he was up to!" one man cried out. "If you hadn't been so distracted by that cripple of a wife you've got, maybe you'd have known that Horton was stealing from the town!"

There was a gasp at the man's cruel words, and everyone hung, in silence, waiting for Jackson's rebuttal. With a glowering look, he simply said. "Anyone who speaks about my wife like that has no place in Gold Creek and can leave the settlement immediately! This is not a town that will be built on prejudice and ill feeling." He stopped and switched his gaze towards Miss Clarabelle and her party. "That goes for everyone. Do you understand me?"

* * *

A FRESH BEGINNING

* * *

Gold Creek, three months later.

"I can't believe this is our life now." Ava sighed contentedly, and looked out over the town, which was growing in size and population by the day. Besides her, sitting in the new rocking chair that Jackson had specially made, was Ava's Ma, resting, getting used to the heat in the California sunshine.

"Ava, it's so beautiful out here," her Ma said, laying her head back and letting the sun fall onto her face. "I'm so pleased that you've made a life for yourself out here."

Ava knelt down on her good knee and took her Ma's hand. "I'm so pleased that you're out here with us now Mama."

The older woman opened her eyes and gazed up at her daughter. She'd hardly have recognized the girl who left Philadelphia almost a year earlier. She was still just as slim as ever, and her hair was still the same pale blonde, but there was a change in her face. Her thin, once translucent skin now glowed pink and sun-kissed, and there was a permanent smile on her now up-turned lips. She was so proud of her daughter she could almost burst.

"Ava I'm sorry I ever doubted that you could make a life out here; that you weren't strong enough."

Ava sighed and sat down, as both women gazed over the harsh, beautiful landscape. "It was hard though mama, and at first I didn't think I was strong enough either. For a long time, I doubted that I

was, actually."

"What finally convinced you otherwise, my girl?"

Ava took a while to collect her thoughts. When she cast her mind back over the last year, she could hardly believe the distance she'd come, in every way imaginable. "It was many things Mama. I needed to believe in myself, and to trust in God, and his plan for me. And...", she started to add, looking over her shoulder at Jackson, who was busying himself in the house ..., "I had Jackson to help me, to show me that I can be stronger than I ever thought."

It took some time for her Ma's reply to come. "I'm glad for you Ava. I am glad that you've found a life here; not just a life devoid of love either, like how you were in Philly..."

"Mama, I wasn't without love in Philadelphia! I had you of course, and I wasn't alone. I was happy...enough." She tipped her head forward.

"You know what I mean, Ava. I always knew you were lonely, deep down." Her voice got lower, more serious. "Sometimes, very bad things have to happen so that good can come. At the time, it seemed a tragedy that you ever had to come out here, to leave behind everything you knew, but now it seems like the greatest blessing."

Ava nodded. "It does. It really does mama."

* * *

Ava and Jackson looked over the old, abandoned gold mine.

"What's going to happen to it?" Ava asked.

Jackson's eyes danced over the pit, remembering that terrible night when he thought he'd almost lost Ava down there. And all the other troubles the gold mine had brought them. "Nothing, for now. It's being laid to rest. Unless, that is, some new up-starts want to have a go at it."

"The farmers will be happy," Ava mused.

"I don't doubt it," Jackson replied. "Joe, especially, says he can't wait to see the back of the darn thing."

"You know," Ava said thoughtfully, "I only have fond memories of this place."

"You do?" Jackson asked in surprise.

She nodded. "When you think about it, this is the place that brought us together, isn't it? Jackson, if you'd never come out here to dig for gold, you'd never have established Gold Creek, never have sent for me and we'd never have met."

He raised his eyebrows and turned back to the mine. "Never thought about it in that way. You're right, no sense in cursing a thing that's brought us so much happiness in the end."

They began to move away from the edge, back in the direction of the town. Ava changed the topic to the subject of the town's outlaw.

"So how is Horton doing?" Ava asked.

"He's doing well, or as well as he can be. He's repented, and shown himself to be sorry for his crimes. He'll serve his time, of course, but I believe I shall show him leniency."

Ava wrapped her arms around her husband and smiled up at him.
"Well, as town Marshall that is within your rights."

"Do you think it's the right thing to do though?"

Ava mused for a moment. "It's the right thing to do - to show forgiveness. Look at me; look at Ma," she raised an eyebrow, just slightly, then looked down. "Look at us Jackson. We had to forgive each other to get to this point."

"I had to forgive you for very little, my love," Jackson said. "I think it was me who needed your understanding."

"Well, you've got all my understanding now, Jackson. And you should have had it all the way along; you were doing the right thing for all of us after all. You can't have helped knowing that Horton was stealing from you. Plus, you've now made things right anyway; even showing leniency to him now that you're the Marshall. That's what a true leader does though. You've come through for all of us, my dear." As Ava spoke, the words of praise gushing out, she came to marvel at the way she now spoke freely to her husband, no longer scared to show her emotion and no longer scared to let her love show.

"I couldn't have done any of this without you, Ava. You've been by my side the entire time, as I've taken the town into reign, and started my new post."

"You're doing a wonderful job," Ava gushed. "Everyone is proud of you, me especially."

"I still can't believe that I'm the Marshall," Jackson declared, wondering at how the entire thing had come about when it was him

who originally had been of the opinion that the town could function without any formal laws or law enforcement.

"You're not regretting your decision to take on the role, are you?" Ava asked. "Not missing the long days and nights down at the mine?"

He thought for a second before shaking his head. "No. It seems like it is the right thing to do, in a strange sort of way. It's funny the way these things work out, isn't it?"

Ava let out a soft laugh. "Mama was just saying the same thing earlier. How it seems, perhaps, that there is a divine plan in place for all of us."

Jackson leant down and took Ava's soft face between his strong hands and gazed at her delicate features, looking into her eyes and seeing the beautiful woman that she'd become. No, he corrected himself; the beautiful woman she had been all along.

"Ava you're the most beautiful woman I have ever known in my life."

She blushed a little, but kept staring up at her husband. "Do you have to say that?"

"I mean it Ava. I don't mean just physically, which you are, of course, but in every other kind of way – in your strength, the way you rise up and face any adversity no matter what comes your way and the manner in which you hold yourself - some may say it's prim or proper, but I only see it as grace and elegance my dear."

Ava bowed her head a little as her husband continued on. "Most

of all though, your beauty is in your heart - your forgiving nature. The way you've put others happiness above your own, even when it was terribly hard on you. And now, Ava, all I want to do is give you all the happiness you deserve."

"Come on now," she said coyly, almost embarrassed of all the praise, though her heart sang as she heard it, and took it all in. "Let's go home before it gets too dark."

Ava sighed and stretched her arms up as the sun started to set behind them in the California sky, red, orange and pink dancing in rays over the rough land. She reached over for her cane so that she could walk easily back to the homestead. Jackson, instead, held out his arm for her. "Lean on me instead," he said.

* * *

THE END

MAIL ORDER BRIDES OF WESTERN
ROMANCE

2

SILENT BRIDE AND HER HESITANT WIDOWER

ROSELLA

* * *

Chicago, 1850.

"Rosella! Come quick - she's about to burst!"

Rosella dropped her pen at the sudden outburst. *"I'm mute, not deaf,"* she thought, wondering why everyone always had to yell at her as if she couldn't understand what they were saying. She wandered over to the window and peered down onto the street. Below, she could see Mary huddled over a basket which contained a moving bundle of fur.

"Oh no!" Rosella thought. *"Not Maisy."* She turned from the window and ran down the stairs into the cold Chicago street, speeding around the corner and almost knocking over a man in a suit. She put her hands up to show she was sorry, but the old man simply scowled at her, taking her lack of formal apology as rudeness. Rosella looked over her shoulder in distress.

"Another misunderstanding." But there was no time to dwell on that. Her friend - and her cat - needed her.

She came running 'round the corner to where Mary was kneeling beside the pregnant stray. The younger girl turned around at the sound of Rosella, panic spreading across her face. In a basket below her, the pregnant cat was meowing in agony.

"But it's too early. She shouldn't be giving birth yet..." Rosella thought. She and Mary had taken the poor stray in a week earlier when they'd found her, pregnant and starving, outside their residence.

She still looked far too small to be giving birth. Rosella's mind raced, wondering if the kittens would survive being born this early.

"We need to get her inside," Rosella thought, tugging at Mary's sleeve. Once she had the other girl's attention she pointed back towards the barn. Mary nodded, showing that she understood.

"She's in pain though - can we move her?"

"It's the only way," Rosella thought. With Mary's help they wrapped the cat up gently in a cotton rug and carried her to the barn, shielding her from the harsh Chicago wind.

* * *

"Six kittens...all healthy and strong..." Mary said, shaking her head in awe. "I don't know what we're going to do with all of them. They can't stay here. We weren't supposed to have the cat as it was."

Rosella thought about the cruel master of the house, Mr. Jenkins, and about what he would do if he found them with a litter of kittens hidden in their servant's quarters. It didn't bear thinking about. Rosella knew what she needed to do: she needed to take care of the kittens by finding them new homes.

She motioned to Mary to show what she meant to do, pointing at the other houses on the streets and miming knocking on the doors. Mary nodded. "It's the only way, isn't it? Oh, I just hope we can find them all a good home."

"So do I," Rosella thought. *"A place where they will be warm, and safe, and looked after."* The servant's quarters was no place for a litter

of newborn kittens.

* * *

Knock knock.

Rosella lifted up the basket, smiling hopefully. She pointed to the note on the front. *Free, to a good home.* The old man took one look, shook his head, and slammed the door shut on Rosella. She stepped back as the force of the door hit her.

Patting the kittens comfortingly on the head, she continued down the street.

"Oh, please don't snow..." she thought, looking up at the grey clouds that were starting to form overhead. The bad weather affected her twofold. For one, she didn't want the kittens freezing in such cold conditions. She held the basket tightly to her, making sure they were all safe and covered with the blanket.

For two, this particular weather brought with it a storm of painful memories. It was a day like this when she had witnessed something that no child should ever witness...

As the violent scenes threatened to intrude upon her thoughts she shook her head, trying to get rid of them. Her throat tightened and she felt her pulse quicken as she tried to get the gruesome thoughts out of her head. Below her, in her arms, the kittens mewed and she was brought back to the present moment. Relieved, she looked down and patted them on the head. She felt more comforted by them than they were by her, she was sure.

She looked down on them, taking pity on the poor creatures. *"I promise to find you a good home,"* she thought, closing her eyes.

She then turned to prayer. *"Dear God, please let me find kind people to look after these kittens. A house with plenty of food, and love, and shelter from the bad weather."*

She opened her eyes and looked up at the next door. She recognized it. It belonged to the Miller family, and Rosella had known Mrs. Miller since Rosella had been a little girl. She felt hopeful as she reached out and knocked on the door, knowing that the house would be full of children, who'd be excited about a new kitten in the family.

* * *

"I love kittens!" The two little girls jumped and down with excitement, crowding around the basket. "Oh, Mama, can't we take all of them?"

Mrs. Miller looked down at the children with kindness, but a slight look of exasperation. "Can you promise me you'll be able to take care of all six?"

Rosella waited hopefully for the answer, hardly able to believe her good luck.

The children bounced up and down. "Yes! We promise, Mama."

"We'll take all of them," Mrs. Miller said, turning to Rosella.

"Are you sure?" Rosella wanted to ask. She looked around the house. It did seem as though it was a good home, and that the family had the funds to be able to look after the kittens. Plus, the children

seemed like they would love the cats dearly, and make good foster parents for them. Rosella was so happy that the kittens would get to stay together. They'd be much happier that way.

"You can sit down if you like, dear - can I get you a hot drink?"

Rosella nodded with fervour. *"Sounds wonderful,"* she thought, smiling at the kind woman. She marveled at the way that God had led her to the exact right place at the right time. Mrs. Miller left to boil the kettle and Rosella took off her hat and scarf, setting them beside her on the table, settling in.

* * *

Upon the table, something caught her eye. A newspaper, left open at the advertisements page. She never liked to be disloyal to her employee - even though Mr. Jenkins could be cruel at times, he'd still been good enough to give her work and a roof over her head - but every now and then she indulged herself by checking the 'help wanted' ads. She always looked for a position that had two vacancies - so that, if she ever did leave, Mary could come with her.

But on this day it was a different kind of "wanted" ad that caught her eye.

A "wife wanted" ad.

"Animal lover wanted, to be wife of Horse Whisperer in Californian Gold Rush town.

Must be kind, gentle, and a lover of animals. Willing to start over, to make a new life, and to help out on a farm and to be a

helper to widowed Horse Whisperer."

For some reason her heart began beating fast. *"Animal lover?"* That was her, alright. And a horse whisperer. *"How wonderful,"* Rosella thought. She put the paper down and let herself daydream for a moment, of a life out in the Californian sun, a thousand miles away from Chicago and everything that had happened here.

"It could be a new life, a new start..."

She got a grip on herself. *"Don't be silly, Rosella. Your life is here, and, well, this is just your lot in life."* Even though in Chicago, everything served as a memory of the tragedy that had taken place thirteen years earlier, when she'd been just sixteen. She was twenty-nine now, and even though she was older - almost a spinster in age - the memories still made her feel like that frightened girl that had witnessed her parents get murdered.

"Running away won't change anything, Rosella..." she told herself. *"It certainly won't make you speak again."*

She had to stop herself as that thought began to spiral. No, there was no sense in hoping that a change in scenery might make such a drastic change. She hadn't spoken in thirteen years, and a trip to the other side of the county wasn't going to make her magically snap out of it. If it were that easy, she would have spoken before now.

Still, before her mind could stop her, her hands reached out and ripped the page out of the paper, shoving the advertisement into her pocket.

"What am I doing?" she wondered, shaking her head. *"I'll probably*

throw it away as soon as I get home."

When Mrs. Miller came back into the room with a cup of tea, Rosella straightened up, remembering the reason she was there. The kittens. She raised her eyebrows and looked at Mrs. Miller hopefully.

She smiled back. "Everything is fine - we'll take good care of all of them. There's just one issue with the kittens..."

Rosella's face fell.

"I'm not sure about the six of them..."

Rosella's stomach fell as well. She couldn't bear to have the kittens separated, now that she'd had her heart set on them all staying together.

Mrs. Miller continued on. "We think it's best...if we keep the mother as well. So that they can all stay together."

Rosella beamed. Though she loved Maisy, she'd much rather the cat stay with her kittens. Plus, she knew that Maisy would have a much better home here. Oh, she was so glad. She nodded happily, and Mrs. Miller came over and placed a hand on Rosella's arm. "I'm glad to make you happy, Miss. It's been such a long time since I saw you happy..."

Rosella's face fell a little, as Mrs. Miller sighed and continued on. "You were such a bright, happy child, as I recall. Always playing, making trouble. So loud, too!" She stopped and looked at Rosella, a strange look on her face. "Seems odd to think about it now, doesn't it?"

Rosella pulled her arm away, still smiling, but a different feeling

overtaking her. She was grateful to Mrs. Miller, and she knew the woman only meant well with the words she was saying, but Rosella didn't like to hear them. It pained her to think about the girl she once was. The out-going, bubbly girl...it seemed a lifetime ago. Seemed like a different person altogether. And in many ways it was.

She made a move to show that she needed to go.

"Alright, dear. And don't worry, we'll take good care of all the kittens for you."

Rosella nodded. "Thank you," she mouthed.

"Of course. Anything for you Rose..." the woman said, a look of sadness in her eyes, as she watched Rosella.

Not wanting to see that look in her eyes, and the memories it brought back, she hurried away, wrapping a shawl around her tightly as she hurried away down the windy street.

* * *

That night she took the "wife wanted" ad out and read over it for the hundredth time.

Animal lover. New life.

There was excitement in her stomach as she read over the words, there was no doubt about that. Only one problem. The ad was for one person, not two. She glanced over and watched Mary sleeping. They'd done everything together since they'd met thirteen years ago. Mary had been Rosella's voice when she didn't have one. Whenever Rosella checked the 'help wanted' posts, she always made sure that there were

two positions available.

But this was something she was going to have to do alone.

"Can I do it?" she wondered. *"What will this man think of me, a silent bride?"* She sat up with her thoughts for a while. In Chicago, she'd found it impossible to meet a man who wanted to marry her with her handicap. It was difficult for most people to see past. Some thought her odd, at best. At worst, her silence led to all manner of misunderstandings. The one she most disliked was the way that most people assumed she was stupid, just because she was mute. But Rosella was whip-smart, quick, and clever. Without words though, people over-looked her, spoke about her in front of her face as though she wasn't even in the room, ignored her...her silence made her feel invisible.

She looked over the ad again.

"Could this really be a fresh start?" she thought. A chance to begin again, to get away from all the pain that Chicago held for her.

And a chance to marry.

She wondered if this might be her only chance.

That night she wrote to Benjamin, the Californian horse whisperer, sending a prayer along with her words.

"Dear God - let this letter find him well."

BENJAMIN

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850.

"Hey girl..." he murmured, gently stroking the horse on the back. Ruby was the most difficult horse he had ever attempted to tame during his career as a horse whisperer.

She snorted and flared her nostrils, taking a step back and rising onto her back legs. "Woah..." Benjamin said, putting his hands up in a reflexive position that said, "I surrender." Shaking his head, he had to wonder at the spirit of the horse. With her black coat Ruby was a majestic looking creature, but she had a wild side that Benjamin just couldn't tame. Usually horses responded to his guidance and gentle instructions, but the term 'mind of her own' seemed to have been coined for this horse.

Placing a hand on the animal's back, he made another attempt to calm her. She seemed to flinch.

"Are you in pain?" Benjamin asked. "Is that what the problem is?" He shook his head as he looked over her. She seemed perfectly healthy, showing no signs of sickness or lameness. No, it was something else that troubled this wild horse. Something that went beyond his usual powers. Something he just could not understand. Whereas other horses responded instantly to his methods, Ruby held out, like there was a barrier in communication between them. Usually he felt as though he and horses spoke the same language, but he didn't understand Ruby at all.

He sighed and walked away from the paddock. Another day, another failed attempt at getting Ruby to respond to him. Luck just seemed to fail him as far as this horse was concerned. Shaking his head, he walked back to his home, passing through the town of Gold Creek as he went. After almost a year in the new settlement, it was starting to feel like home. Originally settled as a gold mining town, it had now developed into a friendly little community, starting to settle down now that there was law and order established, and a new Marshall - Jackson - in charge.

Benjamin waved to Mr. McGillicuddy at the main store, tipping his hat, as the older man called out a cheery hello.

"You look like you're lost in thought, Benji! Something getting you down?"

Ben shook his head and grinned. "Nah, nothing I can't handle!"

"It's not that horse of yours, is it...that black one with the bad temper?"

"Ah..." Benjamin replied, "She's not too bad. A little trouble, but I'm sure I can get her to come around in the end."

"Well, you are the best at your job!"

"That's what they say," Benjamin replied with a laugh, but deep down he didn't feel so confident. His pride wouldn't let him admit that the horse might just get the best of him. Not out loud, and not even to himself.

It had been six months since the collapse of the gold mine - the

reason all the pioneers had moved out there in the first place - and it was a time of transition for the town. Those that had been caught up in the gold fever had thinned out, going back to San Francisco or other large cities, and those that had stayed behind had had to find new lives, new jobs. When he'd first arrived Benjamin had been a miner, second-in-charge down at the mine, but now he had settled into a more peaceful life as a horse whisperer.

At least, it was peaceful at times; when he didn't have a disobedient horse to deal with.

But there were other things on his mind that day, far happier things.

He was expecting a letter. The thought that one might be waiting for him back at his home made him quicken his pace. He was trying not to get his hopes up too high; after all, it had only been a few days since the last one.

Another letter! He opened it eagerly, keen to know Rosella's answer. He loved the way she wrote, the way with words she had. Every letter from her was like talking to a close friend. Her words seemed so familiar, like they had been talking all their lives.

He couldn't wait for her to arrive. To talk to her face-to-face, not just in letters. He could tell from the way she wrote that she was intelligent and wise, funny and kind, and as far as he was concerned, letters were no longer enough.

It was time for him to ask her to move to Gold Creek. To marry him. He'd never been so sure of anything in his life.

With joy, he picked up his pen and wrote the most important letter of his life. The letter that would ask Rosella to leave her home in Chicago, to come out to California to be with him.

"We can make a wonderful life out here, Rosella, I truly believe that. I can tell from your words that we have so much in common, and your love of animals means so much to me. I can't wait for you to be here with me, so that we can be married."

He sealed the letter and set out for the post office without any delay. As he made the walk Benjamin was happier than he had been for a great many years. He felt as though Rosella might just be his perfect match. An animal lover, with a fine way with words....what could be better?

* * *

THE WEDDING

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850

There she was. Rosella. Benjamin's face lit up as he strode down the coach platform. The moment he had been anticipating for weeks had finally arrived.

He took his hat off and approached the pretty blonde woman. She was wearing a full length dress of white and pink, with matching bonnet and gloves, and Benjamin thought she was the prettiest woman he had ever seen in his life.

"Rosella?" he asked, a little shyly. "Hi. I'm Benjamin. I've been waiting so long to meet you. I'm so glad you're finally here."

She stood up shyly, keeping her face hidden under her bonnet. Gazing up at him, she smiled coyly.

"How was your journey?" he asked. "Was everything okay?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Were there any problems?"

She shook her head, still keeping her face slightly downwards.

At first Benjamin took her silence for manners, thinking that his new bride was simply shy, and overwhelmed by the occasion of the day. Anyone would be, he reasoned, not thinking too much of it.

"She'll open up a bit once we get to the church," he reasoned. "And even if she is a bit shy, she'll come out of her shell once she gets to know me a little. It must be very overwhelming for her."

He picked up her luggage and she smiled shyly again. As they walked along Benjamin was a little nervous about what to talk about himself, and found that he began to ramble on about whatever came to his mind. He started to tell Rosella all about the town, about how they'd just appointed a new Marshall, and that the town's most notorious outlaw was about to be released from jail.

He noticed Rosella make a nervous face.

"Oh, don't worry," he said, laughing to try to make her feel at ease. "It's perfectly safe here in Gold Creek. A little rough, of course, as we are still quite a new settlement, but you aren't in any danger." He paused. "Except maybe from the horses."

She looked up, questioningly.

"There's one or two wild horses I'm trying to train at the moment. Well, one..." As they walked along, Benjamin filled Rosella in on the whole Ruby story, surprised at how much he was talking. Usually he was a man of few words. Especially when he first met someone, and especially a pretty woman. He wasn't sure what had come over him. He figured he was just nervous. Plus, Rosella wasn't saying much, and he felt as though he needed to fill in the gaps.

"So..." he said, finally taking a breath from his long speech. "What do you think of the town so far?" They were in the middle of Gold Creek's main street, right out the front of the general store. "I know it's not much - not compared to Chicago, anyway. This is probably a big

change for you, hey?"

She nodded.

Benjamin realized she still hadn't said anything. Boy, she must be really shy. *"Oh well, not to worry! I know from her letters that she has plenty to say. Must just need a little time to feel comfortable. That's understandable."*

"Is there...is there anything you want to know?" Benjamin asked, eager to hear her speak.

She shook her head.

"Oh." He looked around the town. "Sorry if I'm talking so much. I can't seem to stop rambling on and on..."

Rosella shook her head to show that she didn't mind.

He laughed. "I guess it's just because you're not saying much." *Or anything*, he thought to himself. As they walked on towards the church he began to get worried.

Did she not like him? Was that why she hadn't said anything?

"Oh no, she hates me," Benji thought. *"She doesn't know what to say, so she's just being polite."*

As they walked the sinking feeling in his stomach got worse and worse. He began to fear that Rosella hated the town, hated him, and was regretting her decision to even come.

"She must be regretting it...or else why would she not be saying

anything?" he thought. He wondered how he should go about asking if she was okay. After all, they were about to be married, about to take the most important vows of their lives, in front of God, and he wanted to make sure this was what Rosella actually wanted.

He stopped walking and Rosella paused besides him.

"Rosella, is this..." he trailed off, wondering how to broach the difficult topic. He needed to bring it up though, to make sure. "Is this what you want?"

She tilted her head as though she didn't understand.

"Being here, I mean. Marrying me. Is this what you want to do?"

She nodded her head, still looking confused.

"Oh," he said, smiling a little. "I was just...a little unsure. Because you're not saying anything. Just wanted to make sure you're happy."

Rosella stopped walking and made a sad face.

"Oh," Benjamin said. "You're not happy, are you?" He looked down at her and frowned, wondering why she wouldn't tell him what was going on.

She attempted to shake her head to show that he was mistaken, that she was happy, that he'd gotten it all wrong, but he read the action to mean that she wasn't sure about the wedding, or him.

"Rosella, I know it must be overwhelming for you, arriving here in a foreign place, so far from everything you've known, but...please talk to me," he said, kindly. "If you can talk to me - even a little - we might

be able to sort this out."

Rosella shook her head and Ben caught the look of distress on her face. She opened her mouth and pointed at her lips, then shook her head.

"What?" Benjamin asked, furrowing his brow. "Have you lost your voice? You have a bad throat? Is that it?" He wondered if maybe the dusty environment was affecting her voice, or maybe the long, rough journey on the coach had caused her some kind of injury.

Rosella dropped her head and shook her head again, more gently this time.

"What is it, Rosella? You can tell me..." When she still didn't speak, he wondered if he should just leave it. *"It's rude to push her - impolite. She is probably just shy around a strange man, and overwhelmed in a new town."*

* * *

Rosella trotted along, taking in the new town. Her senses were overwhelmed - dust flew up into her face, and into her eyes. She tried to use her bonnet for protection, but it still stung her. Around her, she tried to take in her new surroundings.

"It's so tiny," she thought. She'd expected small - from Benjamin's letters she knew Gold Creek was a new settlement, but she hadn't expected to be able to walk through the entire town in less than an hour.

"I wonder if this is all there is..." she wondered, looking from left to

right, at the tiny little shops and houses, some of which were no less than a few feet wide, and none of which were more than one story high. She'd been used to living in a large, grand house back in Chicago - her master's house had been three stories tall, and rock solid. The houses here looked as though they could blow over in a strong wind. Still, there was a sense of excitement building in her stomach.

"It's different alright, but different is just what I wanted," she thought, looking around the town with bright eyes. *"This is so different from Chicago in every way...this really will be the fresh start I need to put the past behind me."*

Beside her Benjamin was talking, and Rosella was glad to hear his voice. She listened intently while at the same time checking out the new town, taking in the strangeness of it, wondering at the twist of fate that had led to her arriving in such a wild place.

"I wonder where we will live..." she thought, as they reached the end of the street. *"I know we're a bit out of town, on a farm, with horses. Oh, I can't wait to see it!"*

Of course, she couldn't ask about the farm out loud, and it was becoming apparent that Benjamin was wondering why she wasn't talking.

Guilt tugged at her, as she stole a few shy glances at her soon-to-be-groom. Benjamin was handsome, there was no doubt about that. Tall, much taller than her, and with golden brown hair that spilt out from under his hat. Just the kind of cowboy that she had read about, and imagined. She could hardly believe a man like him could exist in real life.

But there was the guilt: Rosella wondered if she should have been more honest in her letters. Oh, she'd been as honest as she could have been of course, and she hadn't lied about anything important. Hadn't lied at all, to be technical. She'd just...left one thing out.

"He is wondering why I haven't spoken yet..." she thought, the butterflies in her stomach starting up. *"And he keeps asking what is wrong, wishing for me to talk back to him. How long before it becomes too much, and he demands I talk to him?"*

She hoped that he only thought she was shy, and that he wouldn't press the point too much. Instead, she was grateful that he rattled on, filling the silence for her. She listened eagerly as he described the town to her as they passed through it. She was a little nervous when she heard that an outlaw was about to be released from the jail, but Benjamin reassured her that she would be safe.

"I do feel safe with him, with Benjamin," she thought. *"I feel already as though I have known him for a very long time."* And for once this was a thought that she was glad not to say out loud. Imagine what he would think if she spouted such things the moment they met! He would think she was very sentimental and foolish. No, this was a thought she was glad to keep private.

But there were other things she didn't want to keep private - even though she'd only just met Benjamin, there were already things she longed to say. He seemed disappointed, and kept asking if she was alright, if she regretted coming to Gold Creek.

She wanted to shout out, "No!" She wanted to exclaim that she loved the town already, and its strange shops and houses, and that Benjamin seemed wonderful, and that she was looking so forward to

meeting his horses, and starting their new life and adventure.

But all she could do was shake her head and point to her mouth. Her way of trying to explain that, yes, she was fine...she just couldn't speak the words to tell him so.

But he mistook the action, thinking that she was unhappy. She saw his face drop, and he turned away from her, falling silent himself.

"Oh, please keep talking," she thought, wanting to apologise, wanting to explain that she was happy, and excited, but it seemed the damage had already been done.

As they approached the Church, Rosella's heart sunk, wondering if this was how it was always going to be: a wall between them, a barrier that could not be broken down.

"Can we have a real marriage, if we can't communicate?" she wondered, sadly.

* * *

It was when they took their vows that Benjamin finally realised that Rosella couldn't talk.

Before the ceremony, he'd asked her one more time if she was fine, if she was happy, and she'd looked up at him with her big blue eyes and nodded, her eyes filled with what he hoped were happy tears.

But when they stood before God and their pastor to say the words that would bind them together in marriage, Rosella did not have the ability to repeat the words the pastor recited.

"Is she alright?" the pastor whispered, leaning forward towards Benjamin. "She seems a little overwhelmed, sir."

But Benjamin was only focused on Rosella, who was looking across at him with her large, bright eyes. "Rosella, you can't speak, can you?" he asked, gently.

She shook her head. At the same time the pastor did a sort of double take, trying to remain proper and polite, but the shock still showed on his face. "Should I continue on, then?"

Rosella nodded with vigour. "Yes," she mouthed, to show that she dearly wanted the wedding to continue. She didn't travel for weeks by coach, leaving behind everything she had, to give up on her new adventure already. In her heart she was sure she'd come to the right place, and that this was her chance for a new start. There'd been times when she'd been in the wrong place...the very wrong place. When she was seventeen, for instance. But now she was sure that God had guided her to Gold Creek by placing that advertisement in her hands. Travelling out here had been a blind leap of faith, and now that she'd met Benjamin she was even surer that this was her new home.

If she could have spoken she would have said so. All she could do was look into Benjamin's eyes and try to tell him in this way. She stared into his brown eyes and tried to say, *"This is where I want to be."*

Benjamin nodded and turned back to the pastor. "Carry on, please."

* * *

As they walked back to the house, Ben was overwhelmed with a

hundred thoughts.

"She can't speak? But how will we get along, if I don't know what she is thinking? What she wants? How she feels?" He scratched at his face, thinking about the walk to the Church. He felt silly now, thinking about how he'd rambled on, and the assumptions he'd made.

"She isn't shy at all, she just can't speak. Well, maybe she is shy as well, there's no way to tell..." he thought, wondering how Rosella would cope in such a small town as Gold Creek.

"People here talk, they gossip," he thought. *"This will be the talk of the town by tomorrow, make no doubt about that."* He looked over at his new bride, feeling protective of her already. He wanted to shield her from the opinions and attitudes of the other women in the town. It was bad enough that she was new in town, and from such a different city as the rest of them. But with this to worry about as well, Ben was scared it might all be too much for him.

"I just wish she'd told me..." he thought. He felt guilty as the thought hit him, and he had to consider it. *"Would it have made any difference, though? From her letters I could tell she was a kind, loving, intelligent woman, the perfect wife for me. Should her being silent make any difference to that? She is still the same person on the inside."*

No, he decided: even if he had known Rosella was mute, he would still have wanted her to come to Gold Creek, would still have wanted to marry her. But if she'd been more upfront with him, he could have at least been better prepared. Now, he felt blind-sided by the news, and struggled to make head or tails of it.

"How do you - how do you go about every day activities?" He

asked her. "For instance, when you go to a shop. How do you ask the shopkeeper for what you need?"

Out of habit he waited for the reply. "Oh," he said, embarrassed when it didn't come. He shook his head, feeling it go red a little. "Sorry about that. I'm just...I'm not used to... well, you know." He cleared his throat, wondering if he was saying too much, offending his new bride. That was the last thing he wanted to do. He only wanted to know that she would be alright, and to understand a little of her plight.

Rosella tapped him on the arm. The motion caused him to jump a little, before he looked down, realizing that was her way to get his attention. "What is it?" he asked.

She pointed toward a field up ahead, with some excitement.

"The horses?" he asked.

She nodded, to show her enthusiasm.

He broke into a smile. Perhaps this would be a way for them to communicate. He was eager to show her the horses, so he led her to the field which played home to the animals. He caught her eyes lighting up as they approached the creatures.

"You like horses, right?" Benjamin asked, watching carefully for Rosella's response. He was slowly getting used to interacting with her, remembering that he needed to look at her for a response, as he had only visual cues to go on with her, not audible ones.

He watched as she nodded. He noticed a sparkle in her eyes as she

looked over at the horse. *"She said in her letters that she loved animals, and horses especially."*

But there was a tightness in his throat as they approached the paddock. After all, he was a horse whisperer. And in his mail order bride ad, he had clearly written that he'd wanted a wife that could be an assistant to him. He'd been hoping - perhaps foolishly - that his new bride might even be able to help out with Ruby. He'd always secretly wondered if Ruby needed a woman's touch, a woman's voice, to help tame her. Maybe that was the missing piece of the puzzle.

But how could a woman without a voice be a horse whisperer?

* * *

Rosella was, deep down, a happy, loving woman, with a big personality, but knew that her silence often got mistaken as her being reserved or too proper. She was used to being misunderstood. She wondered now, during their first few days together, if her husband was making these same assumptions.

"What does he think of me?" she fretted, as they sat in silence during one late dinner. *"Perhaps he thinks I'm stupid, if I can't talk. People often assume that, I can tell."*

But she clung to one hope: the letters she had sent to him. Surely, from getting to know each other that way, Benjamin had seen the true her. *"Surely he must know that I am not stupid,"* she hoped. *"Surely he must have gotten a sense of my true personality through those letters."* But even this hope was wearing thin. She could tell from the look in her new husband's eyes that he was disappointed with her, in real life. *"Oh, what does it matter, all the things we wrote to each other about? All*

of that has been forgotten now that he has met me, that is clear."

She had to stop herself from thinking about the matter too bitterly. After all, things were not so terrible. She loved the new town, and the horses, and she was still excited about the prospect of her new start in life, her second chance.

"Anyway, hope is never lost with God." She made a firm promise that her prayers would be extra-long that night, that she would show gratitude for the new start she had been blessed with, and ask for guidance on how to communicate with Benjamin better.

"Perhaps after dinner is finished we can sit for a while, and Ben can tell me about his day," she thought, looking forward to the night ahead. *"After all, I might not be able to speak, but I love to hear him talk."*

But there was an abrupt change to her plans when Ben stood up after dinner and began to walk towards the door.

"I need to go out," Ben said, grabbing his hat.

"This late?" Rosella thought, disappointed. She frowned at him, then mouthed the word, "Why?"

Understanding, Ben explained that he was going to try with Ruby again.

"That wild horse?" Rosella thought. *"Be careful."* She worried about that horse - worried she might hurt someone. Might hurt Benjamin. She tried to look at him, so convey her concern to him. *"Please protect yourself."* As much as she liked Ruby, she was wary of the mare. She's never really had contact with wild animals before - the only animals

she'd had contact with in Chicago were family pets such as cats and dogs. She knew she would come to love the horses in her own time, but the more wild ones scared her a little.

"It's fine, though," she thought. "Ben will understand that I need a little time to get used to them. I just hope he takes care of himself around that wild mare in the meantime."

Ben paused, trying to read the look on Rosella's face. "I don't want to give up on her until I've tried everything," Ben said, firmly. "I'm sorry, but I really need to go."

Rosella nodded, trying to look happy. *"I understand,"* she said, but she felt sad at the same time, thinking about her hopes for a quiet evening together.

As Ben stood at the door he paused for a second. Seeming to read her mind, he said, "When I get back, perhaps I can read out loud to you a little."

"That would be nice," she thought, smiling, wishing that she could say the words aloud.

* * *

Out in the field Benjamin paced back and forth, lost in his own thoughts. *"What a crazy few days,"* he thought. *"I feel as though my entire world has been turned upside down, and I don't know what to make of it all..."*

There was one thing that troubled him more than anything. Well, two things. Firstly, he was worried that Rosella would be considered

very odd by the rest of the townsfolk, and that the gossip and strange looks might hurt her. But there was a deeper worry he had. And it wasn't just about he and Rosella would communicate with each other. He was already learning that he could tell what she was thinking at times, just by looking at her. Sometimes you don't need words in order to speak.

There was something else.

He wondered if Rosella was going to be able to make a proper life for herself on the farm, as the wife of a horse whisperer. He'd caught the look on her face when he'd told her he was going back out to try again with Ruby.

"She looked as though she really didn't want me to go. But doesn't she understand? This is my life here. Or, at least, a very large part of my life. If Rosella doesn't care for the horses as much as I do, then how is it supposed to work?" As far as Benjamin had seen, she had little interest in the horses. He'd wanted a partner to help him, an assistant.

"Oh well, you can't have everything you want," he thought, remembering to be grateful for what he did have. Rosella was kind, and beautiful, and a good wife to him, he could tell that. He needed to focus on all the wonderful things she was, not the few things she lacked.

But, oh, how he longed for her to be able to speak to him. He wondered what her voice sounded like, and what she would say to him if only she could. It was one thing to communicate just through looks, just through their eyes, but it was another to be able to speak properly.

"I feel like there's something more going on with her...a reason, maybe, why she won't speak, why she is silent. There seems to be a barrier that we can't get across. If only she could explain to me what the problem is... Perhaps if I can just get her to open up...trust me," he thought. "That might get her to speak."

With that he made a plan in his mind: he was going to earn Rosella's trust, and then she would finally speak to him.

* * *

A MISUNDERSTANDING

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850

"The silent bride" the people of the town called her, sniggering at Rosella as she walked past them.

"I can hear you, you know," Rosella thought, walking past with her head held high, trying to act as though she really couldn't hear their harsh utterances. *"I can hear your words, I just can't respond to them."*

Sometimes it seemed bitterly unfair to her, that she could be spoken to - spoken about, in such harsh terms - but had no right of response. Never able to defend herself. This caused a great deal of assumptions to be made about her.

One day in the general store, she walked in shyly, looking for the ingredients to make a pie. Mr. McGillicuddy was standing behind the counter, looking at her strangely as she entered. He was a kind man, but he was curious about her impediment, as he'd heard the town gossips talk about her.

Rosella felt his eyes on her as she approached the counter. "Hello dear," he said kindly, adjusting the spectacles on his nose, feeling a little nervous about what to say to her.

She smiled back and pointed to some sugar behind the counter. "Sugar?" he asked. "How much would you like?" Then he went a little red, realizing that she would not be able to answer.

Rosella smiled to try to put him at ease. She held up one finger to

show that she wished for one kilo.

"Oh," Mr McGillicuddy said, chuckling a little. "I suppose it's not so hard for you to communicate after all, is it? It's just, people have been saying that you can't talk, that you might be dumb or somethin'...." He stopped when he saw the expression on her face, how she bent her head down to hide her face.

"Oh, sorry, dear. I didn't mean nuthin' by it. Don't worry about it. Let people talk, say what they want. They're just words, aren't they? Words can't hurt you."

Rosella kept her head bowed for a second. "*Words can hurt you,*" she thought. "*And it hurts even worse when you can't speak them back, to defend yourself, or to tell your own truth to people.*" But she bravely brought her head back up and reached across the counter to take her kilo of sugar. She held out her hand to pay with the coins she had but Mr. McGillicuddy held up his hands.

"Not today dear, it's on the house for you."

"*I don't want your pity,*" she thought, looking up unsurely.

"It's just to say welcome to Gold Creek," he explained. "And to apologize for my rudeness before."

"*You don't need to apologize,*" Rosella thought. The man seemed kind, and warm, and she liked him right away, even if he had put his foot in his mouth a little. It was understandable - sometimes people got nervous around her when she didn't speak, and ended up saying too much themselves, in a way, to overcompensate.

She smiled to convey her gratitude and mouthed the words "Thank you."

"My pleasure, dear," Mr McGillicuddy replied. "Now come back soon, you hear me? And don't let the words of others get you down."

* * *

The sweet scent of baking pie was in the air, and Rosella's spirits were high after her experience in the general store. It had been a pleasant morning so far, and she was hoping the remainder of the day would follow.

Benjamin came inside grinning, eager to share something with Rosella.

"*You seem very happy,*" she thought, glad that her husband was sharing in with her cheery mood.

"I've got a little news. Well, not news really," he explained, a little nervously. "I suppose it's more of an idea. I've come up with an idea that could help us," he said, beaming down at her.

She frowned, a little unsure what he could mean by this. "*What great idea is this?*" she thought to herself. Looking up, she nodded to indicate that she wanted Ben to continue. No matter what this crazy idea was, she would rather hear it than not. The wait was making her anxious.

"Here, let's sit down and talk about it," he said, pulling a chair out for her. He caught the look on her face as she sat down. "Geez, sorry," he said, scratching his head, feeling embarrassed again. "I keep saying

things like that, don't I? I will talk and you can listen."

She pulled a face. *"Just like usual..."* she thought.

"Actually, it's the whole 'talking' thing that I wanted to speak about," Benjamin continued.

"Oh?" she thought.

He smiled and took her hand in his. "I've been wondering..." he said, speaking carefully, "if there's anything I can do?" He paused for a moment and took in the look on her face. It was clear she didn't understand. "What I mean is, is there anything I can do to get you to...open up to me?"

She took her hand back and hung her head.

"Rosella?"

She shook her head gently. Benjamin sighed in frustration. "There must be something I can do! Look, I know that maybe you think that you can't trust me. Maybe I need to do something to earn your trust before you are able to speak to me?"

Rosella kept her head down. *"It's not that simple,"* she thought. *"If it was that simple, as easy as switching it on or off, don't you think I would do so?"* But without the words to communicate she just sat there, trying not to show that she was upset by Benjamin's casual attitude. She'd hoped so much that he would understand her handicap – that it was not a simple thing, not something that she could just snap out of. That it was the result of a deep trauma that could not be easily overcome. If he only knew what she had seen, the horrors she had

witnessed – he would understand that the very idea of speaking caused her to panic.

But of course, she could not speak up to explain any of this to him, and he mistook her sad reaction to mean that she wasn't even willing to try his idea.

"I'm trying here, Rosella! Can't you at least meet me half way?"

"Half way?" she thought. "This isn't 'half way', this is all one way - your way. With no understanding for what I'm struggling through."

Benjamin continued on. "It seems as though you have no interest in life here in any way. Any interest in the farm, or the horses - or in me!"

Rosella opened her mouth to show her distress, but no words would come out. Oh, how badly she wanted to protest. To say that she loved the farm, and the horses, and that, maybe she could even love Benjamin if he weren't so stubborn...but she couldn't. Only silence came.

* * *

That night when she was getting ready for bed, Rosella pulled open a drawer to find a stack of papers and notes.

"What are these?" she thought, pulling them out. "Letters..."

As she scanned through them she quickly realised that they were all the letters she'd sent to Benjamin since they'd started communicating. They looked well read, with crinkled pages and tea stains on some of them. She pulled one out and turned it over, seeing

that her writing went onto the back of the page, and then onto another four sheets of paper.

"I have a lot to say when it can be written..." she thought, sadly, thinking about all the time and care she had put into the letters, about how she'd stayed up all night writing them and how the words had flowed easily.

She sat down on the bed with the papers falling limply in her hands. She couldn't figure out if she was happy that Benjamin had kept all the letters or sad, as they must have served as a reminder that the only way they could communicate properly, with words, was when they'd been written down.

She had a sudden thought. *"Perhaps I could still write to Benjamin now..."*

Standing up, she opened the drawer again and looked around for some blank papers. There will still some empty sheets of the same paper that she recognised from Benjamin's letters to her.

Grabbing the empty pages, she found a pen and walked to the kitchen, lighting a candle so that she could see in the dim of the night. The only other light was the faint moonlight that came in through the kitchen window. As she picked up the pen, it seemed very strange to Rosella, to be writing a letter to her husband while they were under the same roof.

"I wish it didn't have to be like this," she thought. She felt silly sitting there in the dark, writing a letter.

"Perhaps Benjamin is right, maybe I should just be able to 'snap out of

it'..." she thought, as she began to write out how she was feeling in her heart.

And in fact, that's what she put in her letter. She wrote honestly, with clarity, about how she was feeling, about how she'd been hurt by their earlier fight, and about how sorry she was that they couldn't find a way to communicate.

Dear Benjamin,

I know this will be hard for you to understand, but I must tell you what is in my heart. I've prayed on the matter, and when I found the old letters I sent to you, that you kept, I realized this might be the best way to explain to you the feelings I have on the matter.

I know that you only mean well, truly I do, but no matter how hard I 'try' I cannot easily speak. This is not something I can snap out of. Do you know how many times I have prayed, wishing it was different? Or how many times I have wanted to speak to you? All the things I have in my heart that I wish to speak out loud? I can't. It is not a simple matter for me. There's no way to snap out of it so easily. When you act as though it can be easy, I feel as though you do not understand me at all...

Once she'd gotten half way down the page she started to change her mind.

"This isn't the full truth..." she thought. "It's part of it, yes, but it doesn't explain the full story. Benjamin needs to know the full truth. He deserves to know that."

But her hands shook as she picked up the pen again. She'd been silent for thirteen years, ever since it had happened. Not only had she

never spoken about what happened, she'd never written about it either. Her hand froze for a second as it hovered over the paper, and she had to will herself to carry on.

The second part of the letter was far harder to write, and it took three times as long for the words to come out. As she wrote she felt her heartbeat racing, and her writing became more of a scrawl as she struggled to control her shaking hand.

You see, Benjamin, there is a reason for my silence. I wasn't born like this, and it's not something I can switch on and off.

When I was seventeen, I witnessed something that no child should ever have to see. The most chilling thing imaginable. My parents, killed in cold blood, murdered in front of my eyes by a stranger. The shock was so great that from that moment on, any time I tried to make a sound, tried to speak, my throat closed up.

I couldn't speak about anything I saw, and from that point onwards, I couldn't speak about anything, at all.

You see, even the thought of speaking causes a great panic inside me. It doesn't matter how much I long to speak to you - and I do long to - I physically can't.

I hope you can understand now, my dear, that my silence is not personal. That you haven't done anything wrong.

But that there is nothing you can do. This is my fate, and I fear it is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life."

"What's this?" Ben asked, turning the letter over in his hands. He looked up at her quizzically. She reached out and wrapped a hand around his, squeezing it, nodding at the letter.

"You want me to read this now?"

She nodded.

"Okay," he replied, seeming a little nervous. Rosella watched his face as he read over her words. His brow was furrowed in concentration, and once he got to the middle of the letter she noticed his face change. The sorrow in his expression made her heart ache. She had to drop her own head, turn away for a moment, to let him finish reading on his own. She knew that now that she'd explained things, that everything was going to change between them once again.

"I only hope he won't pity me even more..." Rosella thought. *"Oh well, it's the risk I had to take. We are married now, and Benjamin needs to know the real truth about me, the dark times as well as the good."*

Once he'd gotten to the end he dropped the paper and looked up at her. "Rosella, I...I didn't know about any of this. I'm so sorry. I..." Now he was the one struggling with his words. "I didn't know," he said again, his voice filled with regret.

Now it was Rosella's turn to feel a tiny twinge of regret. She hadn't meant to make Benjamin feel guilty, and she hadn't meant to upset him. She'd simply felt the time had come to tell him the truth.

"I can't even imagine how it must have felt to go through something so horrible..." his voice was deep and troubled, and Rosella could hear that even he was having trouble speaking about it. The

topic was not an easy one to talk about - she knew that better than anyone.

"I'm so sorry, Rosella. So sorry for what you've been through, and for what I said earlier. I was pushing you, without knowing the full story. I had no idea. You're right - I thought it was an easy thing, something you could just snap out of if you trusted me I guess, but now I know you have to trust me in a different way. Trust me to respect you, and to not push you on this matter."

She nodded as he spoke, so grateful for his reaction. She let out a breath that she hadn't even realized she'd been holding all this time. She'd been so nervous to give him the letter, to open up her heart and to tell him about the darkest time of her life. But he had reacted just the way she'd hoped he would.

Looking up at her, Benjamin had another suggestion. "Maybe this can be a way for us to talk in the future - a way for us to communicate properly, I mean."

Rosella turned her head to the side. *"What do you mean?"*

He held the letter up to show her. "By writing, I mean. Maybe from now on you can write your thoughts down, when we have a conversation."

"Oh," she thought, her heart sinking a little. She thought back to how silly she'd felt writing the letter. A necessity, sure, to clear some important things up. But she didn't want to have to depend on writing everything down, in order for them to communicate. She was sure there had to be a better way than that.

"What does he think, that every time we need to talk to one another, I will just get out a pen and paper and write my responses down?" she thought, a little bitterly. She supposed there was a degree of sense to the idea, but she couldn't help but feel let down. She still hoped that they could find a way to communicate properly, one-on-one. Perhaps naively, she'd even hoped that Benjamin would be able to tell what she was thinking and feeling just by looking at her face and body language.

But it didn't seem like it would be that way.

"So what do you think?" Benjamin asked, and as Rosella heard the hope in his voice, she couldn't bear to let him down.

"He seems so happy to have found this way for us to talk," she thought.

So she simply nodded and smiled. But inside, she vowed to find a better way forward.

* * *

A ROBBERY

* * *

Gold Creek, Fall, 1850, two months later

The General Store was quickly becoming Rosella's favourite place in Gold Creek, second only to the farm and her home. Mr. McGillicuddy had been so kind and welcoming to her that she found herself travelling down there even when she had nothing she needed to buy. She found herself making excuses to go in, buying far more tea, sugar and flour than they strictly needed.

Looking around at their overflowing pantry, Benjamin even commented on it. "Are you sure we need all of this stuff, Rosella?" he murmured. "We'll barely get through all of this before it starts to turn bad..."

He turned around to look at Rosella for a response, but she was only grinning and shrugging her shoulders. He laughed in return. "Ah well, it's okay to stock up in advance I guess. I tell you what we do need though, if you want to go into town today..."

Rosella brightened up even more. She raised her eyebrows to ask what was needed.

"Horse feed. Do you think you can managed to carry it in back on your own, though?"

She frowned, but in a teasing way. "Of course!" She was glad of a real reason to go to the General Store, and more than willing to prove that she could carry a bag of horse feed on her own.

Happily, she set off on her journey, carrying a purse with just the right amount of money for the horse feed - her decision, as she didn't want to be tempted by anything else. Ever since that day when Mr. McGillicuddy had been so kind and given her the sugar for free, she'd wanted to pay him back by being a good patron of his store.

"The town seems very empty today..." she thought, as she wandered up the street. "Usually at this time of day there are people milling about everywhere." In fact, it was so strange that she had to stop and think for a moment.

"Just where is everybody? Is there a special event on today, or something?" She had to wrack her brains for a moment.

"It's not...it's not the day that Horton is due to be released from the county jail, is it?" she thought, a little nervously. Around her, there was a stillness in the air that unnerved her even more. No breeze at all - even the wind seemed to be staying away that day. "Yes," she realised. "I think it is the day he was due to be released."

"But surely everyone in this town isn't so delicate that they stay indoors just because an outlaw is being set free!" she thought, astounded that could be the case. The people who lived in Gold Creek were a sturdier breed than that - not easily frightened. "Still, it could be a little unnerving for them, I suppose."

Taking a deep breath, she put one foot in front of the other, a little unsure at first, and continued walking towards the General Store. "Perhaps I should turn and go home as well," she thought. "After all, if the rest of the town is this restless, maybe there is something to worry about."

But she looked down at her coin purse, and remembered Benji's teasing her that she couldn't carry a bag of horse feed on her own. He'd think she'd given up if she returned home without it! "No, best to press on," she told herself, firmly. "After all, I'm not scared."

As she approached the General Store she noticed that her feet had slowed down. There was no denying there was a feeling of uneasiness in the air. Rosella couldn't help the dark thought that flashed into her head. There was a terrible sense of foreboding, a feeling she had had once before...when she was seventeen.

She stopped walking again and took a deep breath. "Come now, you're just being silly. This is nothing like that day." But there was no denying the clenched feeling in her throat. Like a reflex, her throat seemed to seize up at the same time that her heartbeat rose.

"Something's not right," she decided. It was one thing to be silly, but now it was about trusting her senses. And they were telling her something bad was about to happen.

"That's it, I'm turning around, going home. The feed will have to wait for later. I'll deal with Benji's teasing well enough. More important to keep out of danger."

But as she turned around she heard it: a gun shot. It echoed around the empty town, and the street seemed to vibrate with the aftershock of it.

Rosella dropped her coin purse and spun around. She was standing in the middle of the street, unprotected. But it wasn't for herself that she felt worried. The sound was coming from the General Store.

"Horton," she thought. And then, "Mr. McGillicuddy."

* * *

A man came running out of the general store, in one hand carrying a bag of goods, in the other a gun.

Rosella squinted and leaned forward. The man running out - this outlaw - had bright red hair. Even from a distance she could tell that. She'd never seen the infamous Horton, but she knew from Benjamin's vivid stories about him that he had dark hair, not red.

The man took off down the street in the opposite direction with his loot in one hand and the gun in the other, shooting it into the air. Once he was out of sight Rosella started to run in the direction of the store. She had no care for how she looked, or how much dust and dirt was getting kicked up onto her skirt and face. She only cared about making sure that Mr. McGillicuddy was alright.

She flew through the door, unable to shout out for a response, so instead she had to look around for Mr. McGillicuddy. She heard a muffled cry and run behind the counter, where Mr. McGillicuddy was tied up and blindfolded. She sped over to him and set him free, thanking God that he was alright, not hurt by the gun shot. Rosella had seen enough violence in her life, and experienced enough loss. She was grateful that her new friend was unhurt.

Gasping, he looked up at Rosella, surprised that she was his rescuer. "Rosella, it's not safe for you out, what are you doing, dear?" he asked, frantically. "You should go home."

"Nonsense," she thought. "I was hardly going to leave you alone to

fend for yourself after hearing those gunshots!"

Sitting up, Mr. McGillicuddy tried to make sense of what happened. He rubbed his head. "It all happened so quickly..." he shook his head, looking around his store. "I wonder what he took."

Rosella wanted to tell him not to worry about that too much, that the most important thing was that he was okay, and safe now. The man was old, and Rosella knew - thanks to Benjamin - that he had a bad heart. Rosella reached out and put a comforting hand on the old man's shoulder, trying to get him to calm down. She was worried that the stress might cause his heart trouble. He already seemed disoriented about what had taken place.

"I can't believe Horton would do this! On his first day of release!"

Rosella leaned back, shocked to hear this.

"But it wasn't Horton!" she cried out, inwardly. "It couldn't have been - the man had red hair." She tried to shake her head frantically, mouthing the word "no," but Mr. McGillicuddy misunderstood.

"Don't worry, dear, we'll get him caught! As soon as I tell the Marshall, Horton will be back in jail as quick as you can say!"

Rosella shook her head again. "No, no, you've got the wrong man..." As she thought about it she suddenly felt her palms go sweaty and her head begin to get lightheaded. She stood up, shaking.

"It's okay, Rosella," Mr. McGillicuddy said. "We'll get him caught, you're not in any danger."

"It's not that," she wanted to shout. It was all coming back to her.

That day, when she was seventeen...when she saw the terrible thing and couldn't speak of it. Now she'd seen another terrible thing and she couldn't speak about it. The wrong man was going to be convicted of the crime. What hope did Horton have, if he was already considered an outlaw, and. Mr. McGillicuddy was convinced he'd been the one to rob the store?

Horton may have done wrong in the past, but it wasn't fair for him to be convicted of this crime.

But that's what was going to happen if she couldn't speak out.

Mr. McGillicuddy pulled himself to his feet, with the help of Rosella, though she wasn't sure the old man was in a fit enough state to be standing right then. He kept going on about Horton, about how he needed to tell the Marshall immediately, so that he could be caught before he got away.

"I don't know who that man was, but he wasn't Horton..." Rosella wanted to say. She looked around for a pen or a pencil, thinking that she might be able to write down what she saw. Nothing.

She was going to have to go home and get Benjamin.

* * *

"Rosella, what's wrong?" Benjamin asked, seeing his wife fly into the room in distress.

She shook her head, opening her silent mouth.

"I can see you've been crying," Benjamin said in distress. "Come here..." he said gently, reaching out a hand to place on her arm.

If only she could tell me what the matter is, Benjamin thought, but he didn't say that out loud. He didn't want to put pressure on her, to let her know how badly he wanted her to be able to speak to him.

Rosella felt her legs shaking beneath her, and reached out clumsily for a chair arm to steady herself.

"Woah," Benjamin said, reaching out for her. "Easy there. You're not going to faint, are you?"

She looked up at him with frustration. "I'm not so weak that I faint at any sign of distress!" Once again, she was distressed that people often mistook her silence for weakness.

But as she steadied herself on the chair she had to wonder... "Is my silence a form of weakness?" Her mind kept racing, thinking back over the scene she had witnessed in the general store. She worried now that if she were stronger, then she'd be able to speak up and tell of what really happened.

"An innocent man is going to go to jail..." the thought kept running over and over in her head.

Rosella pointed towards the notebook on the shelf. Though she disliked communicating in this way with her husband, she knew it was the only thing to do.

Ben nodded and fetched the book along with a pen. Holding it out to her he said, "Here. Tell me what is wrong.

Her hand scribbled so quickly across the paper that her writing was scrawled and illegible.

"Woah," Ben said, placing a hand over hers. "Slow down. I can't read what you're writing."

"Can't hear me speak, can't read my writing," Rosella thought quickly. "Are we ever going to be able to communicate?"

Still, she took a deep breath and took a hold of her nerves. Bringing her hand back up, she noted that the shaking had lessened, and she began to write again, this time more clearly. Over her shoulder, Benjamin read along with his brow furrowed.

"Are you sure?" he asked, interrupting her writing. He started to grab the paper out of her hands but she reached a palm out to keep it on the table.

"I'm not finished," she thought. "Let me finish."

After she'd explained that it was the red-haired man who'd committed the robbery, not Horton, Benjamin's face fell. Rosella saw his hand drop away, as he dragged it silently across the table and then watched it fall off the table.

"He can't have, though..." Ben murmured. "Are you sure? Rosella, you need to be one hundred percent certain that this is what you saw."

She nodded vigorously. Then, grabbing the paper again, scribbled, "I promise."

* * *

"Are you ready?" Ben asked. Rosella nodded. "Okay, let's go." He grabbed her hand to steady her, and they walked out of the house, towards the General Store, where Rosella hoped Mr. McGillicuddy

would be recovering still. "Hopefully he hasn't jumped the gun and already gone to see the Marshall!" Rosella thought. She hated to see an innocent man accused, no matter what his reputation was. She had a theory that the red-haired man had simply jumped on the opportunity to frame Horton, by robbing the General Store on the day of Horton's release. And if Rosella didn't do something, the plan was going to succeed.

"Come on, Rosella," Benji said, with an encouraging smile. "I know you can do it. And I'm here with you, every step of the way, remember."

They hurried back towards the main street, Benjamin keeping a keen eye out for anything unusual. He could also sense the unease in the town, the way the air crackled with the tension. As they entered the main street he could see wary eyes peering out of windows, checking to see if it was safe to come out yet. Benjamin gripped Rosella's hand to make sure she felt safe.

"She's already been so brave today," he thought, proudly. "Perhaps she really is cut out for life here. Most people would have run in the other direction at the sound of gun shots, but Rosella ran to make sure Mr. McGillicuddy was safe."

He looked over at Rosella and realized he should be saying some of these things out loud to her. He was conscious of the fact that he often fell into the trap of becoming silent, just because she was.

"I'm proud of you, Rosella," he said, simply. She squeezed his hand a blushed a little, looking down.

"I'm not so brave," she thought, but she was grateful for the

compliment.

"Here we are," Benjamin said, taking a deep breath, as they arrived back at Mr. McGillicuddy's store. "Time to speak up and tell the truth. Well, I will, at least. But I'll be sure he - everybody - knows that it was really you who witnessed the crime, and who wanted to come forward."

Rosella's stomach flipped a little, at the mention of witnessing a crime. There'd been another crime she'd witnessed, all those years ago, and she'd never come forward to finger the right culprit.

She stood back as Benjamin explained the situation to Mr. McGillicuddy, explaining to the old man that it couldn't have been Horton that robbed his store. But Rosella was barely listening - she was transferred back in time, to thirteen years in the past, to the incident that had taken her voice away.

"Oh, I'm not brave," she thought. "Would a brave girl have remained silent for thirteen years? I don't know what Benjamin sees in me, this braveness he was speaking about, but he's mistaken."

With the incident cleared up - and Mr. McGillicuddy left scratching his head, shocked that Horton was actually innocent after all, but grateful to have the truth set straight - Rosella and Benjamin left the store, with Rosella very quiet. A different kind of quiet this time, one that went beyond just a lack of words. Benjamin could tell that she was withdrawn into herself, that although her body may have been there next to him, that her mind was somewhere else.

"You okay?" he asked gently, placing a hand on her arm. "I know today must have been very shocking for you. You really were very

brave, as I said."

She shook her head.

"You don't think you were brave?"

"No."

"Rosella, how can you think that? Look at everyone else cowering in their homes, while you've been out here not once, but twice: once to check for danger, and secondly to tell the truth about what really happened. How is that not brave?" He frowned, willing Rosella to hear what he was saying, really hear it. It hurt him that she could think so badly about herself. "Rosella, you are so strong."

She lifted her head gently and smiled a little. She still didn't feel that brave, or strong, but hearing the words from Benjamin meant so much to her. It felt like he could see something in her that she couldn't see herself. She usually felt like that strong, outgoing girl that she'd once been was dead and buried.

But on that day, she'd felt a little of her spirit come back to her. And that made her lift her head a little higher, and - if she wasn't imagining it - she felt her throat loosening up a bit. Or at least, the panicked feeling from earlier was subsiding.

"Maybe I can be brave from now on..." she thought. "Maybe things don't have to be as they have been for the past thirteen years. After all, I wanted Gold Creek to be a fresh start for me - and so far, it really has been."

Her smile deepened, till it lit up her entire face. There was

something else making her happy, and that was the way she and Benjamin seemed to be 'talking' to each other. Sure, she'd had to write down her thoughts about the robbery, but everything since then had been unwritten, and, of course, unspoken. They'd cleared up the misunderstanding about the robbery without words at all, and, by working together, had made sure that the right man was blamed.

"It seems like we really can communicate in our own special way," Rosella thought, her heart warming. "This is what I've wanted all along, to know that we can communicate in our own private language, that my handicap won't matter."

* * *

After the excitement of the day, Rosella needed to get outside to clear her head. She hadn't intended to go past Ruby's field, but she found herself drawn down that way. She approached the mare with a little hesitation, but the events of the day had made her brave, and she got a little closer than she usually would have.

To her surprise, Ruby didn't buck, or flare her nostrils at Rosella. Instead, the mare seemed to cock her head to the side, to look at Rosella not as an enemy, but as a potential friend.

"Wow, I've never seen you like this before," Rosella thought, reaching a hand out gingerly to touch Ruby on the head. When she reacted calmly, Rosella stroked the horse on the head.

"Hmm," Rosella thought. "This is the calmest I've ever seen her. I've never been to see her on my own before - perhaps that is making all the difference?"

Rosella looked the horse deep in her eyes, wishing that she could speak to her. She knew that Benjamin had wanted an assistant horse whisperer, and she felt as though she was letting him down, though he never said it.

"Ruby is reacting to me so well without words...perhaps with words she'd be even better?" Rosella thought, getting a little excited at the idea. "Imagine the possibilities, if I were able to talk to her, to whisper to her like Benjamin does with his horses..."

"No, you're getting ahead of yourself. No sense thinking silly things like that when you're never going to be able to talk again," she thought, giving Ruby one last pat before walking away. She was the Silent Bride. Whoever heard of a Silent Horse Whisperer?

From a distance Benjamin watched the two of them.

"Maybe, just maybe, there's a little bit of hope," he thought.

* * *

Just as twilight was breaking, Benjamin headed back down to his paddock, calling Ruby for her to come over. The horse neighed and flared her nostrils. She didn't respond to his call, and instead ran to the other side of the fence. Benji sighed. Not as bad as she'd been earlier, but it was still clear that the horse had not settled down.

He just didn't know what to do with her.

With some frustration, he sat down on the ground with his back against a wooden post, Ruby running around behind him. "What am I going to do?" he thought. "It seems like she will never become tamed."

He was facing a very difficult decision to make about whether to keep Ruby or put her down. He knew Rosella had grown fond of the horse, so he had not wanted to share this decision with her just yet. "Rosella already has enough to deal with..." he thought, troubled at the idea of keeping the problem from her, but not wanting to add to her stress, especially after the events surrounding the robbery.

Behind him, Ruby snorted and let out a loud neighing noise. Ben looked around, startled by the sudden, aggressive noise. "Come on girl, what's wrong?" he asked, walking just a little too close to the wild mare.

Before he could duck out of the way Ruby kicked out her back legs, hitting Benjamin in the face.

"Ouch," he cried out, knocked over onto the ground. He was dazed a little from the hit to the head, and reached his hand up to his face. Pulling it away again he gazed down at his palm. "Blood..."

He reached his hand up again quickly, checking to see if his nose was broken, and how bad the damage was. "It doesn't seem to be broken...will make a nasty bruise though." He pulled himself to his feet, a little shakily, and took two steps away from the wild horse.

"It's not safe to keep her..." Ben thought. "What if that had been Rosella out here, instead of me?" He shook his head at the terrible thought. "I'm going to have to make a decision that's best for all of us. I'll keep it from Rosella for now. This is my problem anyway, and I will fix it in my own way."

TROUBLE BREWS

* * *

Gold Creek, one month later. 1850

As the weeks passed, Rosella made attempts to make friends in Gold Creek, but without words to speak she was finding it difficult to bond with the other women in the town. She heard the way they laughed and gossiped, and wondered if she would ever find a way to fit in with them. She had one hope: the church fair that Sunday, where she hoped to finally make some connections in town. She had a secret weapon: her famous orange cake.

Rosella popped her head into the general store, not sure at first if she was still welcome to go in there after everything that had happened. But behind the counter Mr. McGillicuddy beamed at her. "Come on in, dear!"

She smiled shyly and bowed her head. Coming over the counter she reached into her purse with her gloved hand and coyly held out a note.

Mr. McGillicuddy read over it and nodded. "Don't worry, we've got all these ingredients for you!" He peered at her from over his spectacles. "What are you making - some sort of cake or something?"

She nodded eagerly.

"For the church picnic," she thought, excited about the upcoming event. She was hoping that her famous orange cake would finally win over the women of Gold Creek - and that she might even make some new friends that Sunday.

"Well then, let me fetch this ingredients for you." Mr. McGillicuddy fixed his spectacles back on his nose and began browsing the shelves. "It might take a little while, Miss - if you've got other business to attend to you can come back in a short while. I'll keep everything safe here for you behind the counter till you return."

She mouthed "thank you" to the man and smiled at him with gratitude.

"Anything for my little saviour," he returned, and Rosella blushed a little as she exited the store. It felt good to be in the good graces of the people of the town, at last. In fact she had to think, as she wandered along the street, that things were going very well for her recently.

"It seems like Benji and I are finally communicating," she thought, as a warm feeling entered her stomach. She'd been so worried that they would never understand each other, but the way they'd worked together to make sure that Horton wasn't wrongly put back behind bars had proven to her that they could communicate, in their own way. And that if and when trouble presented itself, they'd be able to handle it, together. She kept this thought in her mind as she wandered along, and it warmed her.

She stopped walking for a second when she spotted Benjamin up ahead. Her face broke into a grin as she approached him. Seeing that he was talking with another man, she slowed her pace a little, not wanting to interrupt them. She didn't recognize the other man so she became quite shy as she approached them, hanging back a little.

Benjamin didn't seem to notice her approaching. With his back to her, and the quiet way she moved, she was able to move towards

them undetected.

"Should I make myself known?" she suddenly wondered, noticing how deep in conversation they were. She began to think she should slink away again, suddenly nervous and unsure about what to do.

"But it will look very strange to see my husband in public, only to turn and walk away! What if others notice?" Not keen to incite any more town gossip, she took hold of her courage and got a little closer to the two men, choosing her moment to make her presence known. She was hoping that Benjamin would sense she was there and turn around, relieving her of the burden of needing to interrupt.

She heard Ben speak the word "Ruby..."

"I wonder what he is discussing Ruby for," Rosella wondered. *"I hope everything is alright with her."* She stopped walking completely, worried at the tone Benjamin was using. He had his head down, his hat tipped over his face, and Rosella could tell, even from his back, from his posture, that he was deeply troubled as he spoke.

"I think..." he said, his voice low, "that it might be time to give up on the girl."

The other man shook his head and murmured in low tones. "I'm sorry to hear that, son. I know you don't like to give up on any one of your animals."

"It's hard. But it's only going to get harder. After the incident, I don't feel as though I have any choice left in the matter. We're going to have to have Ruby put down. Humanely, of course. Still, it's going to be hard. I haven't told Rosella yet. Not sure she can handle it, to tell

you the truth."

Rosella, her heart frozen, took silent steps backward before turning on her heels. She no longer cared if anyone saw her: she just needed to get out of there. She couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Put Ruby down?" The words made her sick to her stomach. How could this be happening?

Hot tears sprang to her eyes.

"How could he have kept this from me?" As the tears began to fall down her face, hitting the hot dusty road beneath her, she wasn't sure whether she was more upset over the fact that her husband had kept this news from her, or that Ruby might have to be put down. She decided that the pains were just about equal in her heart.

"Oh, Ruby..." she thought with devastation, as the tears kept falling. How could she say goodbye to her beloved horse?

"Was Benjamin ever going to tell me about this? Or was he going to let Ruby die without so much as giving me the chance to say goodbye to her?"

She rushed back to the house, just wanting to be alone with her sorrow. She didn't want anyone to see her crying, to see how distressed she was. When she reached the homestead she burrowed her head in her pillow and began to sob.

* * *

"Rose...I'm going out to see Ruby," Ben called gently, as Rose still had her head buried in her pillow. He hesitated a second before

asking, "Do you have any interest in coming out with me?"

She shook her head. She couldn't bear to go out and see the horse, knowing what was going to happen to her. It would only break her heart even more.

Ben sighed. "Fine. I'll see you later then."

"Just as I thought," Ben thought to himself, as he walked out of the house. "Rosella has no interest in the horse at all! I suppose that tenderness I saw between them was just temporary, or perhaps just for show. If she cared she would come out to see Ruby with me!"

He had to stomp along for several yards before he began to calm down a little. Still, he couldn't help feeling disappointed in Rosella, and it made one thing firm in his mind.

"If Rosella doesn't care about Ruby then I guess the decision really is made: she will have to be put down."

* * *

The following day Benjamin seemed cold and distant, and Rosella was left wondering what she had done wrong. She held out a spoon of cake batter for him to try, and he simply shook his head and turned away, claiming that he had no appetite.

"What is wrong with him?" Rosella thought, knowing that he must have had quite a hearty appetite from a morning spent riding, and it was hours since breakfast. "He seems mad at me. When it is me that should be mad at him! For keeping such news from me." She had to shake her head to keep her mind off Ruby.

"The horse's fate is sealed..." she told herself. "There's no sense in getting upset about it and making matters worse."

She took a small nibble of cake batter herself. *"Mmm, quite good, if I do say so myself. At least something is going right today."*

She saw Ben headed for the door, and, unable to call out to him, was not even able to say goodbye as the door swung shut. Watching him walk away down the long dusty track, Rosella couldn't believe how much things had turned in the last few days.

"It had all been going so well!" she thought, with sorrow. *"And now we seem to be stuck back at square one again."* She couldn't figure out what had happened, what had gone so wrong. She knew why she was upset with Ben, but she was trying not to show her anger. As far as she could tell, it was all coming from his side. After a brief period of warmth between them, the distance had made an unwelcome return.

She racked her brains for an answer.

She could only think of one: it was her silence, it had to be. The fact that she could not speak.

She stirred the batter with too much vigour, thinking it over. *"He has decided that it is too much for him after all – that he can't bear it."* She felt unbearably hurt by this. She'd been starting to think that maybe Benjamin could come to understand her, to love her even with her handicap, but now that all seemed impossible.

She glanced down at the cake batter, which had become overbeaten and was in danger of collapsing.

“Perhaps there is no use me being here at all,” she thought, throwing the spoon down.

* * *

To cover up her devastation over the horse, Rosella had started to act ‘distant’ from the animal, to make it seem as though she didn’t care. Any time she passed Ruby’s paddock from that point onwards, she would turn her head away.

“It hurts too much to look at her,” Rosella thought, ignoring the horse’s neighing and snorting. She had to fight the urge to go over and comfort the horse.

“What’s the point if Benjamin has already decided her fate? He seems so convinced there is no hope for her. He is the expert after all, so if he says that he’s likely to be right.”

Rosella knew only too well the pain of losing someone she loved. Even thinking back to her beloved Ma and Pa hurt too badly, and when the memories of them sprang into her mind she tried to block them out, or the pain became unbearable. Since losing them she had sworn she would never let herself love that much again, in case she lost again.

Even though the action was just to protect her heart, as Benjamin noticed her walking past Ruby and turning her head away, it seemed to confirm what he thought from the start – that she didn’t care about the horse.

Without words to communicate with, the misunderstanding hung in the air, driving a wedge between them, with neither side knowing

what was wrong with the other.

* * *

A DISASTER

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850, One Week Later.

On the morning that Ruby was due to be put down, Benjamin was particularly grave and dark faced. Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he could have sworn he'd gained five new wrinkles during the last week. The lines seemed deeper, and even forcing a smile couldn't do much to mask the sorrow that lay behind his brown eyes.

He didn't want to put Ruby down. In his career as a horse whisperer, he'd never given up on a horse before. It was something he considered a last resort, only when all other options had been tried. Ruby was the most difficult horse he ever had to deal with. After months and months of trying, and people getting hurt trying to help her, there was no other option left.

He crept through the house, hoping to leave without Rosella noticing. He still hadn't told her what was happening and he still thought it was better she didn't find out.

Just as he was about to leave he noticed Mr. McGillicuddy coming up the pathway. The older man was running, a look of trouble on his face, clearly eager to talk to Benjamin. Benjamin flung the door open. "Why, whatever's the matter, old man? You shouldn't running like that, you know that! Not with your heart in its condition..."

Rosella heard the commotion from the next room and peered around the doorway to catch a glimpse at what was going on. She saw a breathless Mr. McGillicuddy, doubled over, trying desperately to explain something to Benji. She saw her husband place a hand on the

old man's back, reassuring him that whatever was wrong, it was going to be alright.

"Can you come with me?" she heard Mr. McGillicuddy ask.

Benji looked around behind him and Rosella pulled back, hiding herself on the other side of the wall. "It's not a great day for me, man..." he said. "I was supposed to deal with Ruby today."

Rosella's heart leapt. So, today was the fateful day. She felt her heart thudding as Benjamin kept talking.

"But it's okay. I can come help you, of course. I can deal with Ruby at some other time."

She heard the door open and bang again, and then the footsteps of the two men walking away down the path.

She tried to take deep breaths to steady her heart beat. Today was the day that Ruby had been scheduled to die. She had no way of knowing how long Benji and Mr. McGillicuddy would be, what the crisis was, or how easily it could be resolved.

"She could still die today," Rose thought. *"Oh, God, I have to do something."* She moved away from the wall which has been holding her steady, and walked over to her favorite chair, sitting down to pray.

"Dear God, I have to do something. I need all my courage now. Please, with your grace, give me the strength and courage to save Ruby's life."

When she pulled her head up again, she knew what she needed to do.

She walked down to the paddock with shaking legs. Still, she'd never walked so fast in her life. She felt as though her legs weren't even her own as she hurried down to where Ruby was waiting for her.

"My poor darling," Rosella thought, looking at the distressed horse. *"You just don't know any better, do you? It's not your fault you weren't raised to obey orders."* She often wondered if the horse simply had an independent soul, and would never be tamed by a human's commands. But even if that was the case, she was not willing to give up all hope, to give up on Ruby completely. Rosella never thought a situation was hopeless. With God's grace, there was always a way forward.

She reached out and stroked Ruby's head, praying as she did so. *"There there, girl,"* she cooed, calming the horse. Underneath her gentle caress, she felt Ruby calm down, and saw some of the wildness leave her eyes.

"There there, girl, it's alright."

Ruby was very still, and Rosella kept stroking her on the head. Moving her hand down to the horse's back, she continued trying to make her feel at ease.

"That's a good girl, Ruby, that's a good girl."

Suddenly, Rosella stopped. Her heart racing at a million miles per hour, she realised, for the first time in thirteen years, she had not simply thought the words: she had spoken them out loud.

She ran as fast as her legs could take her, back to the homestead. Her limbs seemed to fly through the air, and her blue dress billowed out in all directions, dust kicking up behind her as she leapt over the earth. She'd never ran like this in her life. But she was desperate. Desperate to see Benjamin.

To tell him the news.

She grabbed at her throat as she approached the door, wondering if the words would come out as easily again.

"Oh, but if I can speak to Ruby, of course I'll be able to speak to Benji!" she thought gleefully, unable to get through the door quickly enough. Her head was full of visions of all the conversations they could finally have, all the misunderstandings that could at last be put to rest.

And most of all she was excited to be able to tell Benjamin of the best news she'd had in her life: that Ruby could be saved. She'd seen the change in the horse when she'd spoken to her. Maybe it was only small, but it was there. There was hope. There was no reason for Ruby to have to die.

Now she could tell Benjamin.

She ran in through the door, before she stopped dead in her tracks. Bringing her hands up to her mouth, she couldn't believe the scene in front of her eyes.

The entire kitchen had been turned upside down. The table and

chairs were knocked over, the drawers laying on the floor with all their cutlery and porcelain strewn and broken on the floor. And Rosella's orange cake, upside down on the floor, smashed to pieces.

At first she was so shocked she lost the ability to think. *"What on Earth has happened here?"* As she surveyed the ruin her thoughts quickly turned to fear.

"What if whoever did this is still here? Still inside the house?" She spun around before stopping, making sure to make no noise as she listened silently for a sound. The sound of footsteps maybe, or of floorboards creaking - anything to let her know that the intruder was still in the house.

She heard a muffled cry and held her breath. Listening for a second, she realised that it was Benji, crying out from the back room.

She quickly ran, all the fear leaving her body as she hurried towards her husband. Even if the intruder was still there, she had to do something. As she rounded the corner that led to the back room she gasped at her throat again, wondering if any sound could come out.

As she saw Benji sitting there with his hands tied behind his back and his mouth covered, she let out a gasp.

"What has happened?" No words came out as she frantically raced towards him, wondering at the same time if there was still anyone in the house with them. But there was no time for that, and no way to ask anyway.

She reached behind Ben and untied his hands. She then pulled the

material from around his mouth so that he could speak at last.

"Rosella..." he gasped, his voice tight and raspy. "Thank goodness you're here."

She mouthed, "What happened?", shaking her head and pointing around the room.

"It was that red-headed outlaw! He escaped from the jail and came here looking for me. Looking for us." Ben reached out his arms and pulled Rosella in for a tight embrace. "Rosella, thank goodness you weren't here." He pulled back and looked at her face, taking it between his big hands. "Where were you, though?"

Rosella opened her mouth, praying for the ability to speak, but no words came out.

"Oh, what happened to my voice," she thought, as the distress showed on her face.

"It's okay," Benji said, stroking her cheek. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you are here with me now."

He pulled her close again and they sat like that for a long while, Rosella feeling Benji's heartbeat against her own chest.

* * *

A MIRACLE

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850, One Week Later.

In all the excitement, Rosella had forgotten all about what had taken place with Ruby in the paddock, at least, temporarily. With all their belongings stolen by the robber they had more pressing issues to take care of, such as how to survive with all their money gone.

"What are we going to do...? All our valuable possessions. Our hidden stash. Gone, all gone," Benjamin asked. "I still can't believe this has happened..."

Rosella wanted to cry out that it didn't matter about the money and the possessions.

"As long as you're alive." When she'd come home that day to find Benji tied up like that, she just about thought she'd die if anything happened to him. To her, it wouldn't have mattered if they had taken every last thing they'd owned. As long as Benji hadn't been hurt.

But the financial issue was clearly heavy on her husband's mind.

Benji was pacing back and forth, lost in thought.

Rosella walked over to him and grabbed him by the shoulders, her way of getting his attention, to let him know that she wanted him to speak to her.

"Just because I'm silent doesn't mean you have to be," she thought, frustrated. She'd noticed that it had become an easy trap for them to

fall into. Because Rosella was silent, Benjamin was also a lot quieter with her than he was with others. He often seemed to return her silence with his own. But Rosella wanted to hear him speak. She needed to hear him speak. His words were everything to her. Her reassurance, her comfort, her tie to the rest of the world. His words were the bridge between her and everyone else.

When he was silent she felt even more silent.

Benji looked up at her. "Sorry," he said. "Lost in my own thoughts again."

"Don't be sorry," Rosella wanted to say. She hated how much her husband felt he needed to apologise to her. *"Oh, why can't things just be easy?"*

With her hands on his shoulders, Rosella looked at him questioningly.

He sighed and nodded. "I guess it's time to tell you what's on my mind. What's been in my heart for months, actually. It's about Ruby."

Rosella took a step back, still looking up at him, but nervous about what was coming next.

Benji's face tightened as he began to explain about Ruby, about how was she untamable, about how he'd been debating her fate for months. He caught sight of the look on Rosella's face. Horror. Distress.

"Rose, I tried everything with her, really, I did..." he said, not wanting to see that look on Rose's face. He felt immediately that he'd let her down. Oh, maybe she really did care about that horse.

He continued on. "I was even starting to think that maybe she could be saved. On that morning we were robbed, I was still half-hopeful. I thought I might give her one last chance on that day. But Rose - now that this has happened..." He trailed off, looking around at their now threadbare house. "It doesn't seem reasonable to keep her. It takes a lot of time, and money, to take care of a horse like that. And now, with things the way they are and money now so tight...I need to focus on the horses I can actually help."

Rosella shook her head, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

She opened her mouth and still the words would not come. Oh, how much she wanted to plead with him, to tell Benji how Ruby could be saved, that if only Rosella could speak to the horse, and soothe her...

"She responds to me. I can help."

But what if she couldn't? Since the robbery she'd gone completely silent again.

Hot, large tears spilled down her cheeks and onto the floor. She was reminded in that moment of the darkest time of her past. *"It seems like every time something 'bad' happens, I lose my voice."*

"Any time it matters, I fall silent."

Deep down that is what she worried, what she feared, was true. She'd always felt, deep within her soul, that her silence was a weakness. That if she could just be stronger, if she could just gather the courage, that she'd be able to speak.

Maybe it wasn't that simple, but the guilt still plagued her. And now her beloved Ruby's life was at stake. She took a few deep breathes to steady herself, but Benji was already grabbing his hat and walking out the door.

"Enough is enough," she decided. Firmly. Forcefully.

It took guts, and it took all the courage she had in her, and it took a quick prayer to God before she was ready, but as Benji held open the door and walked through it she ran after him and grabbed him by the arm.

And she spoke.

* * *

STARTING OVER

* * *

Gold Creek, 1850

At first the words came out as only a croak, barely audible. Benjamin turned around slowly, in shock, as the first words squeaked out.

"What? Rosella?" he asked, his voice a mixture of alarm and joy. *Can this be real?* He wondered, thinking maybe he was seeing and hearing things. Perhaps he'd just wanted Rosella to speak so badly that he was imagining things.

A single word blurted out from her, from deep in her chest. "WAIT!" Rosella cried out. She once again grabbed Benji by the arm. "Wait," she repeated.

He nodded. "I'm waiting. It's okay, Rosella, I'm not going anywhere." His heart was beating fast from adrenaline. He could scarcely believe what was happening, what he was hearing. Noticing that Rosella was panicking, he took her hand and reassured her.

"It's okay. Take as long as you need. I'm here, Rose. You can talk to me. In your own time."

"Wait," she said, again. Then, "No." She shook her head. "No. No. No." She kept shaking her head vigorously.

"No...no what?" he asked.

Rosella reached her hand out and pointed towards the paddock.

"No!" she cried again.

"Ruby?" he asked. "No...no to Ruby. You don't want me going to her?"

Rosella nodded.

Ben couldn't help the sigh that escaped from his lips. "I know you want to save Ruby...but there's no use, Rose. She can't be tamed. Can't be helped. I've tried everything."

Rosella shook her head. That wasn't what she meant. Of course she didn't want Ruby to die, but Ben already knew that.

What he didn't know was that Rosella could help. That it was her very voice that could hold the key. She'd seen how the horse had responded to her voice. She knew, that if she could only speak, could keep speaking, could find the courage, that she could save Ruby.

Ben stood there waiting. He made himself be patient, allowing Rose to answer in her own time, even though a big part wanted to rush her. And an even bigger part wanted to jump up and down with excitement at the prospect of his wife finally talking. But he had to remain calm, and patient. He'd tried pushing Rosella to speak in the past, and he'd learned his lesson. He needed to let her speak in her own time.

She opened her voice and a few words came out. "Ruby. Can help."

Ben took her hand and led her over to a wood log, where they sat for a few minutes. It seemed to him that the effort to speak had almost

winded her, and she needed time to recover.

"Your hands are shaking, Rose."

She nodded. With a little effort she stilled her shaking hands and took a few more deep breaths. Then, with the strength of God behind her, she began to talk.

With her voice restored Rosella was able to explain to Ben that the horse could be tamed - with a little care and with her help. The words came slowly, sometimes painfully, and sometimes not quite in the right order. But the meaning was there. Rosella needed to get just one point clear.

"Me," she said, pointing at herself. "Can help. Can help Ruby."

Ben took a step back, and looked at her unsurely. "Can you? How, though?" He caught a hurt look on Rosella's face.

"Can speak. To Ruby. To help her."

"You can speak to her?" Benji asked.

Rosella nodded excitedly. "She responds. To voice."

"But how do you know that?" Benji asked, confused.

Rosella felt like her voice might close up again. She was nervous to explain that she'd already spoken to the horse a few days earlier. How would Benjamin react?

"Come on Rosella, it is not the time to go silent again," she told herself. It was time to be strong. Ruby needed her.

"Spoke to her. Three days ago."

Ben looked up in shock. "You did?"

Rosella nodded, a little more unsurely this time. "You...you mad?" she asked.

"Mad?" he asked, reaching out for her hand. "Rosella, no I'm not mad. I'm just...I'm shocked. I had no idea..." he thought it over for a moment. "Was this on the day of the robbery?"

She nodded, and in her own way, tried to explain that she'd come rushing home to tell Benji the news when she'd seen that the house had been torn apart.

He took a deep breath, trying to process everything. After a moment his voice went very serious. "Rosella, does it really work? You voice, with Ruby, I mean? Did she really respond to you?"

Rosella nodded eagerly.

"My my..." Benji murmured, looking at her with pride. "My little horse whisperer."

* * *

Benjamin was overjoyed by the news about Ruby and to finally hear Rosella speak. Down at the paddock he watched on in awe as Rosella went up to the horse and whispered in her ear. The change in the horse was instant and noticeable. Ruby was instantly calm and still, and seemed to react to every word and whisper from Rosella.

Benjamin could hardly believe what a perfect day God had

blessed them with.

Back at home, he began to open up about his own past and pain with Rosella. She listened on quietly, as Benjamin described the pain he felt at losing his first wife back in San Francisco.

"I'm so sorry, Benji...I can't imagine the unbearable sorrow that must have been for you." She was surprised at how easily the words were flowing now. It seemed the more she felt the words in her heart, the easier they were to say. But there were still some things she held back.

"I'm glad to be able to speak to you about these things, finally."

Rose went quiet for a moment. Something about that statement upset her. She couldn't quite articulate what. Sensing that she was holding something back, Benjamin prodded her, asking what the matter was.

"It's..." she stammered a bit, unsure of whether to bring it up or not.

"Yes? Rose, you can tell me." The look in his eyes told Rosella that he was desperate for her to talk to him. He could see the fear in there as well: the worry that she might go silent again at any time.

She knew it was time to be brave and speak. "Why did you feel that you could only speak to me - truthfully and honestly - once I could speak to you?"

He was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...you could have spoken to me about this right from the

start. I was the silent one, not you." She hung her head. "It seems as though you never really accepted me as a full, strong person when I was silent." She looked up. "Is it only now, that you see me as whole? Or trustworthy? Benjamin, I was the same person then as I am now."

"Rose..." he murmured, reaching out for her hand. "It's not like that at all..."

She looked at him, unsurely. "Isn't it?" she asked, quietly.

"Not at all. In some ways your silence was your greatest strength. I still love that you only open up and speak to people - or animals - that you truly trust. Or..." he added quietly, hopefully, "that you love."

She kept looking down shyly.

"To have you finally speak to me - well, I take that to mean that you now trust me. That's all. Not that you are any more whole, or perfect. I've thought you were perfect all along."

* * *

TRUST

* * *

Gold Creek, end of 1850.

The year was coming to an end at Gold Creek and Benji and Rose were busy making preparations for Christmas. With all their possessions - and money - returned to them, it was looking as though it was going to be a very happy Christmas. Things had changed. Rosella had a new nickname in town. No longer The Silent Bride, she was known now as The Silent Horse Whisperer, the women who had a magical way with even the most difficult of horses.

"Come," Benjamin said, grinning as he reached for Rosella's hand. "I've got something to show you."

"What is it?" she asked, as Benjamin began to gently guide her out the front door. Clearly it was something outside. "Oh, you haven't taken on yet another horse?" she teased, good-naturedly. Since their good luck with Ruby, Benjamin had practically flooded their farm with new horses, all of whom they were taming, and teaching to behave.

Rosella let out a gasp as she saw what Benjamin wanted to show her.

"Is that...Ruby? In with the other horses?" She could barely believe her eyes. After months of being isolated, Rosella had never thought the mare would be able to mix with the others without being aggressive. But there the horse was, right in front of her eyes, docile and content, as she grazed on her feed with her head down.

“Can I...can I approach her?” Rosella asked. There was a reason she was double checking, as she had to be extra careful these days, in her new condition.

Benjamin nodded. “Yes, just be a little cautious.” He stopped and grinned. “But there’s no need to worry too much. She is like a different horse these days.”

Rosella stepped away and walked towards Ruby, who lifted her head gently and gazed at Rosella with her big brown eyes. All the wildness of the early days was gone, and now her true nature shone through: she had a kind, gentle nature, which had just needed the right person to bring out. There was silent love exchanged between them.

“Hey girl...” Rosella murmured. Ruby immediately responded to her voice, lifting her head, wanting to get closer to Rosella, to make physical contact with her.

Rosella glanced down at her stomach and took a cautious step forward. Benjamin was right though: there was no risk now. A different horse was standing in front of her now.

“I guess there really can be second chances...and opportunities to start over...” Rosella mused, as she petted the horse. “Both of us have a new life now. A chance to start over.”

She said goodbye to Ruby and headed back to Benjamin, who was watching her with pride.

“I knew you had it in you, Rosella, to be a magical horse whisperer.” He chuckled a little as he said it. “Sorry, I don’t mean to

tease you.”

He placed an arm around her shoulder. “ I could see your strength, and your beauty, from the first moment I saw you.” He stopped and took a good look at his beautiful wife, taking her face gently in his hands. “From the moment I received that first letter from you, I had faith that you would make a great difference to my life out here. To the farm, and to the animals. And I was right. Rosella, I’m so glad you’re here, that you’re my wife. I’m more grateful for that than I’ve ever been for anything. And I will remember to thank God for this every night in my prayers, for the rest of my life.”

She was quiet for a second, as she watched the animals. Finally, she had to ask, what was in her heart. “And you’re grateful that I speak now?”

He heard the uncertainty in her voice, and he turned her face up to look at his. “I’m grateful, of course, yes. But even if you never spoke, I would still be just as grateful for you. And love you just as much. Being able to speak is just a bonus.”

She smiled and put her head down gently, glad to hear the words he had spoken. As they stood and watched the animals on their farm, Rosella reached down and put a hand on her rapidly expanding belly. They watched the horses gently frolic, and the cattle in the distance, and Rosella was glad that she was going to bring their new baby into such a happy environment, filled with so much life already. They were taking on and caring for lots of animals – sometimes more than she thought they could deal with, but she put faith in God that they were not sent more than they could handle. It was her and Benjamin’s vow to not give up on any of them, nor on each other.

"I don't want to put down any animals because of their bad temper...." Benjamin noted. "I'm so glad we didn't give up hope with Ruby, and I never want to get that close again."

"I agree," Rosella replied, softly. At times she still had trouble speaking, and she had to trust someone before she could fully open up to them. Strangers, she was still silent around – at least, until they earned her trust. But with Benjamin, and the animals, and her friend Mr. McGillicuddy, she was able to open up. Slowly, she was putting her past behind her, and the terrible memories haunted her less and less. "I don't want to give up on anyone ever again."

Benjamin reached round and placed his own hand over Rosella's protective hand on her belly. "Never again," he reassured her. "Not the animals, not each other, and not on hope. Especially with our baby on the way."

Rosella turned her body around to face him, and, gazing up at her husband, spoke the most important words she had ever wanted to say, the words that didn't always need to be vocalised, but that sounded all the more sweeter when they were.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Rosella."

* * *

THE END

MAIL ORDER BRIDES OF WESTERN
ROMANCE

3

DEAF BRIDE AND HER SENSIBLE TEACHER

LUANNA

* * *

Chicago, 1851.

"Luanna, can you stop day-dreaming for a second, and get over here to help!"

But Luanna Adams was a million miles away, staring at the scene in front of her. A horse-drawn wagon was pulling into town, and in the seat was the most beautifully dressed woman she'd ever seen in her life. "Oh, who is that..." she murmured. Beside her, her best friend Mary placed a hand on her arm and turned Luanna to face towards her, the only way for Luanna to understand what she was saying.

"Luanna, I need your help with getting the supper ready, come on," Mary said, waiting to make sure Luanna had read her lips, and could understand what she was saying. She understood well enough, but she couldn't bear to tear herself away from the sight in front of her.

"Who is that?" she asked Mary, temporarily ignoring her pleas for help with the supper. "In the wagon?"

Mary shrugged her shoulders a little, her gingham dress bouncing up and down. "Looks like a bride to me."

"Oooh, a wedding," Luanna murmured. "I can't think of anything more exciting. Do you think we could follow along for a little, see who it is?"

"Someone very rich by the looks of it," Mary replied, sternly,

pulling Luanna's head back towards her so that she could lip read. "Now, come on, we've got more important things to be getting on with. There's no time for your wild imaginings."

She sighed. "You're right. We've got dinner to be getting on with. Far less glamorous, but far more necessary, I suppose."

* * *

As Luanna peeled the potatoes, Mary had to wave a hand in front of her friend's face to get her attention. "Still a thousand miles away? You're not still thinking about that bride, are you?"

Luanna dipped her head, a little embarrassed that her friend had read her thoughts so easily. "I was just thinking about how beautiful she looked. How excited she must have felt. Even with all my powers of imagination I can't feel what that must be like." Her voice had turned a little sad and Mary felt bad for bringing the subject back up. The kitchen of the family was a long way away from a glamorous bridal ceremony.

"Of course," Luanna said, turning her voice more sensible. "I don't need to worry about any of that."

Mary tried to smile. "Yes, I suppose there's no sense trying to imagine things we are never going to experience."

"Oh, but those are the very best things to try to imagine, don't you think?" Luanna asked, dropping the knife. "Not much fun imagining something that you can experience every day. Or dreaming about what you do in your everyday life. What's the point of that?"

Mary shrugged, picking up Luanna's discarded knife. "I go to sleep dreaming about peeling potatoes."

"Oh, but that's just because it's all we ever do, so it fills your thoughts. Come on, Mary, don't you every imagine something a bit more...romantic?" Luanna's voice turned soft again and the look on her face said she was lost in her own thoughts, once again.

Mary blushed. "No, of course not. Do you think I imagine getting married? At my age, twenty-nine? Same for you, Luanna. Sorry to say so, but you and I are old maids."

That brought Luanna firmly back down to earth. She sighed and reached across for her knife, taking it from Mary's hands. "I know, you're right. I'm just being silly. Besides, even if I was a young girl, who would want to marry someone who was deaf?"

Mary reached across and patted Luanna on the arm. "I don't think that makes any difference."

"It does," Luanna replied. "Anyway, you're right, I am too old to marry now." She busied herself in chopping potatoes, working so quickly that the knife became a blur in her hands. "I wasn't being serious, anyway. Of course, it was just nice to look at the bride, to imagine what she might be feeling. That's not the life God has planned for me though. I know that. Don't worry, Mary."

* * *

That night, with the rest of the household quiet, Luanna had time to dream again, and to get lost in her own thoughts.

"It's hard to admit, but I have never given up hope of finding true love...does that make me foolish? I fear it does." She crept up the staircase as carefully as she could, but as she couldn't hear she wasn't sure how noisy she was being. She didn't want to wake anyone, not at that time of night. She intended to walk up to the top room and look out at the stars for a while. Her little private ritual, on nights when the sky was clear. It wasn't much of a view from the attic, but she loved to sit alone and stare upwards, letting her mind wander.

On this night her thoughts were a little heavier. She sat her candle next to her on the small attic table and looked outside. *"Twenty-nine is not so old, is it...?"* she wondered, staring up at the dark blue sky. *"How silly it is that at twenty-nine we women are considered spinsters, old maids, when men can marry at any age."* There were many things about the world she didn't understand, and a whole lot more that she would change if she had the chance. But she was resigned to her small life in the Jenkins' kitchen. Not just an old maid, but a maid. As far as she could tell, there was no way out of the life she had; no other path to take, no other options.

"If only I hadn't gotten ill when I was a child. Then maybe I wouldn't be deaf, and someone may have wanted to marry me," she thought, bitterly. This was a dark idea, and she rarely let herself think such things. Luanna believed firmly in God, and her faith told her that God had a plan for her. There was no sense in regrets, wondering what might have happened if things were different.

"This is my life, and I need to appreciate the good in it," she reminded herself. After all, though Luanna was far from rich, she wasn't poor either, and she knew many people had it far worse than her. She looked up at the attic roof and reminded herself to be grateful that she had shelter, and this place to come and gaze at the stars. And in a

moment, she would have a warm bed to return to in her servant's quarters, in the room she shared with Mary. Those were blessings to be thankful for.

Before she returned to her room, she bent her head down and prayed, giving thanks for all these things and several more. She didn't ask for anything, at least not in her prayers, besides the safe keeping of the Jenkins family and Mary. But in her heart, there was something she was longing for, and she wondered if God heard this silent, unspoken prayer.

She wanted love, and she wanted to marry.

But were these things just wild wishes? Or could God possibly have a plan in mind, a plan that Luanna couldn't possibly imagine?

* * *

Life can change in an instant, often in the most unexpected of ways. For Luanna, it was when she received a letter in the post on one chilly Chicago morning. Turning it over in her hands she noted that it was post-marked "Gold Creek, California." Her heart started racing a little. *"It must be from Rosella,"* she thought, not waiting to sit down to open it, but instead ripping it open on the spot.

She was surprised Rosella still thought to write to her, after all this time. It had been a year since Rosella had left to move to Gold Creek, when she'd left everything she'd ever known to marry a man she'd never met. A mail order bride.

Luanna found the entire idea quite romantic - to take a chance like that, to put all your faith in God, to marry a stranger and make a

new life for oneself. She was eager to hear how Rosella was getting on out there, and to read about her tales of life in the Wild West. Rosella had such an interesting way of writing, and Luanna loved to read. She knew she ought to save the letter for when she had time to savor it, but patience was not one of Luanna's virtues.

She scanned the letter quickly at first, to check for any big news, or any bad news. There was only good: Rosella had given birth to a baby girl, and was settled and happy in her new life as the wife to a horse whisperer.

"Oh, how exciting..." Luanna thought, reading over the letter, enthralled at every word. Gold Creek sounded like a wonderful place. If only she could travel out there to visit Rosella! But it was on the other side of the country, and the coach ride took weeks. It was the kind of trip you only took once in your lifetime - only if you were moving there and not coming back.

When Luanna turned the paper over she got an awful shock. At first she couldn't believe what she was reading, and she had to stop, take a deep breath, and read over the words again. She felt like she could hardly trust her eyes, and wondered if she wasn't simply making up the words on the paper, imagining them.

"He's a wonderful man, Luanna - a school teacher! Kind, gentle, well-loved by his students. And he is looking for a wife, just like you. I have told him all about you, explained to him how wonderful you are, and how you would make a perfect wife..."

Luanna dropped the letter onto the street below her.

"A perfect wife?"

A wife? She shook her head. The events of the day before must have seeped into her mind, and now she was just making things up. This must be one of her waking dreams, or else she was hallucinating. Probably she just needed to eat. She was feeling a little faint.

The wind began to blow the letter away, and Luanna shook her head to bring herself back to reality, and chased after it. She couldn't lose it - she needed to double check that what she had read was real.

Someone wanted her to be his bride.

A wonderful man. A school teacher! In California.

She chased after the letter, almost getting knocked over by a horse and cart as she went. Without noise to warn her, she was used to getting in close scrapes, just narrowly making a narrow escape from accidents. In fact, sometimes she didn't even make a narrow escape.

She grabbed the letter up and turned straight to the back, reading the most important part. She closed her eyes and opened them again, checking, one final time, that the words hadn't disappeared before her.

No. They were real. Someone wanted to marry her, and Rosella was going to arrange the whole thing. All Luanna had to do was make the decision.

It was time to take a seat. She wasn't sure her shaky legs could support her much longer. *"This is the biggest decision I've ever had to make. But can there really be much to deliberate? I've already realized that there's no option for me to marry here in Chicago. That my secret dream of doing so must remain just that - a dream. And, oh, I do so want to be a bride. To feel like that woman in the wagon must have felt. This is my*

chance.

"I can't hear people talking. But I hear God speak to me. And he's telling me to follow Rosella's lead to Gold Creek. A new adventure awaits me there!"

* * *

NICOLAS

* * *

Gold Creek, One Month Earlier.

Nicolas Williamson steadied himself as he stood outside the door of the Gold Creek school house. The paint on the outside was still fresh, barely dried, and he could smell the fumes, as he stood there, taking a deep breath.

Nicolas had faced many things during his life: outlaws, gunslingers, some real bad guys. But a classroom full of six to sixteen old children seemed more terrifying than all those things combined. "Come on Nicolas," he said to himself out loud, giving himself a little pep talk. "This is nothing you can't handle. You've witnessed far worse things than this."

But first days can bring out the nerves in even the toughest people, and the first day teaching at a brand new school was trying Nicolas' nerves, that's for sure. Nicolas braced himself for what he was about to face. His new job couldn't be further removed from what he was used to, from the life he'd lived before he moved to Gold Creek. The total opposite, in fact. He'd once been renowned across the land as one of the wildest cowboys in California. But that was a different lifetime, and a different Nicolas.

"It's time to put all that behind me now," he thought, as he adjusted his shirt and jacket. *"After all, that's what I've come here for. A fresh start, and a total change of identity."*

He stepped through the door with confidence, showing that he

wasn't going to be intimidated by a school room full of children. Still, he felt out of his element, to put it mildly. "Good morning, class," he said briskly, keeping his voice friendly, yet authoritative.

He heard a few giggles, much to his discontent. This was not the start that he was hoping for. *"Well, I suppose they're simply sizing me up. Must be interesting to them, to have a new teacher."* Ignoring the giggles and sniggering, he coughed and began to teach the lesson.

"This morning's lesson is Literature," he said firmly. "Now take your seats, quietly please, and let's get started."

* * *

"What a day," he thought. *"One day teaching these unruly children seemed tougher than five years out on the land!"* He sat down and took his hat off his head, his boots scuffing in the dirt as he sat on the rickety bench outside the school yard. *"I thought this would be a change of pace...well, it is I guess, but it's sure not any easier."*

He sighed and thought everything over. *"I suppose I've got to commit to it now."* He lifted his head and glanced around the town of Gold Creek. The settlement was over a year old now, and the population was starting to grow, but it was still a modest-sized town, and a good place for him to hide away.

But already people were talking: one of the hazards of moving to a town with such a small population. Some people had nothing better to do than gossip about newcomers. And already people were whispering about this new teacher, wondering if he was up to the task, if he would be a good teacher for their children...asking questions about his past. *"Too many questions,"* Nicolas thought. *"If*

people were ever to find out who I really was..."

He shook his head. No sense in worrying about that. All he could do was move forward. Make a new life in Gold Creek.

"That means a real life - a full life," he thought. He'd been mulling the idea over for months and he'd firmly decided on one thing: it was time for him to get married. The population of Gold Creek was small, though. There were no unmarried women in town, and San Francisco, the nearest city, was 100 miles away. Besides, he had his reasons for not wanting to go back there...

There was something interesting though...an idea that had taken hold and refused to shake. He'd heard that several of the men in town had placed notices for mail order brides. And things had worked out well for them. Nicolas was still settling in, still finding his feet in town, but he had made friends with a man called Benjamin, a horse whisperer, who'd married a woman called Rosella. She was known throughout the town as The Silent Horse Whisperer, as she'd been mute when she'd arrived, but had learned to speak again and now had a magical way about her for taming horses. A special talent despite her handicap.

"They are happy together," Nicolas thought. *"It seems like this could be a good idea for me as well."* He had reservations, though. Marrying a woman he had never met? Perhaps these other men had just gotten lucky. What if it all went badly for him?

Still, he was used to taking risks. His past was proof of that. He could be brave now, take the leap into the unknown.

Picking up his hat and placing it on his head, he decided to take a

walk across town to speak to his friends Benjamin and Rosella. Maybe they could help him out.

* * *

Rosella was delighted to hear that Nicolas was considering sending for a wife. With her hands clasped together she exclaimed, "Nicolas, I know just the woman for you! Oh, trust me, she will make the perfect bride for you." Rosella was not used to speaking so freely in front of men she didn't know so well, but this was a special case. She was so excited that she might have found a husband for her friend that she was overcome with the emotion of it. "Her name is Luanna, and she's wonderful...my age, twenty-nine years old. She took my old post in Chicago, but I knew her before that, ever since we were young girls. She's smart, beautiful, creative, very imaginative...Oh, she will make the perfect wife for you! I can write to her immediately, if you like, start getting things all arranged..."

Nicolas frowned, exchanging looks with Rosella's husband Benjamin, who was sitting beside them at the dining room table. "Rosella gets a little excited when she speaks about Luanna," Benjamin offered as an explanation. "She doesn't mean to overwhelm you with it all...after all, you haven't even decided that you want to marry yet."

"Oh, it's not that," Nicolas said, smiling across at Rosella. "It's nice to hear that you're so excited about the idea. It's just the way you describe her..."

"Oh?" Rosella said. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure she's a wonderful woman, don't worry about that," he replied quickly, trying not to offend Rosella, or her friend. "But, you

see, I'm settling down here in Gold Creek, with my new job as a school teacher...I'm wanting a bride who can settle down with me. Someone a little more...sensible than you are describing, I feel." He tried to speak gently, for fear of making Rosella feel bad.

But Rosella didn't seem to harbor any ill feeling. In fact, she kept right on talking. "Oh, Luanna can be very sensible, don't worry about that, Nicolas. She's caring, and considerate, and - you can trust me - she is very much looking to settle down and take on the role of a wife. There will be nothing to worry about with Luanna, take my word for it."

"Well..." he replied, hesitating for a second. He tried to catch Benjamin's eye, but the other man was little help, just shrugging at him. "I suppose you can send a letter to her..."

"Ooh!" Rosella cried, clasping her hands as her eyes lit up. "I will get it arranged immediately! You won't regret this Nicolas, I promise you." Then, calming down a little, she settled in her chair and gazed adoringly across at her own husband, reaching for his hand as she spoke. "After all, God always guides us in these things. Put your trust in God, if not in me."

"I'll have to put my faith in both of you," Nicolas replied, standing up and grabbing his hat, nodding his head at Rosella as he made his way to leave.

As he walked out of the house and away down the path of the farm, passing a field of horses to his left as he walked, he started to get this strange feeling in his stomach, like the wheels were already in motion for something he couldn't control. Looking upwards at the sun-drenched setting sky, he said out loud, "It's in your hands now, God."

THE WEDDING

* * *

Gold Creek, Two Months Later, 1851

The big day was finally here, and Luanna, despite her three weeks' journey, was not going to let fatigue ruin her special day. She stepped off the coach with her eyes glossy and wide, eager to see what her new home looked like.

"Oh," she thought, her feet hitting the dusty earth underneath. "Where...*IS* my new home?" It appeared to her that the station was in the middle of nowhere. She had to squint and look off into the distance to make out what she assumed was a small town. "*Is that it?*" she wondered. She looked around at the other people on the station platform, her fellow passengers and the family members who were greeting them. Everyone was dressed very plainly; there was no sense of any grand occasion taking place.

Luanna thought about the woman in the wagon she had seen all those months ago, that beautiful bride in her fine white gown, being drawn in an expensive carriage.

"*I suppose no one will be picking me up in such style,*" she thought. "*Oh well, I have no right to complain. I'm sure that life here in Gold Creek will be filled with excitement, nevertheless!*"

She suddenly realized that she must have looked quite a sight, the way she was jumping around on the platform, standing on her tiptoes to peer out at the town, hopping eagerly, trying to get a good look at everything and everybody.

She caught one woman throwing her a very harsh glare. "Oh," Luanna thought. *"They must think I am very odd to behave so brashly when I've first arrived here."* She bowed her head and walked towards a seat, before placing her hands properly in her lap and keeping her head set forward, her back straight and proper. It wasn't that Luanna lacked manners - she just occasionally got so wrapped up in her excitement that she forgot how she was supposed to act.

"I know that Nicolas wants a sensible wife who can be a good homemaker, and wife, to a respectable school teacher. That's how I've got to behave now. I need to watch my act, and remember where I am."

* * *

Nicolas had heard so much about his new bride - mostly secondhand, from Rosella - that he felt as though he knew her before they'd even met. She was just as described; sandy blonde hair tucked delicately under a bonnet, tall, a slim figure, and a pretty face with bright blue eyes. *"Rosella wasn't lying when she told me Luanna was beautiful,"* he thought, walking towards her to greet her. *"I suppose it will turn out she was right about the rest of it as well."*

But there was an early shock in store for Nicolas as he approached the pretty blonde woman. Not wanting to startle her, he called out her name when he was a few meters away, wanting her to know that he was there, in case she was worrying what had happened to him. "Luanna..." he called out. She didn't lift her head up, so he stopped in his tracks, frowning.

"Perhaps that's not her," he thought in surprise, as he looked around the station. There were no other women there, though, at least, none that were strangers to him. The other women milling

around he recognized from town, at least by face if not by name. As he spun back now it was clear that the woman in the blue and white dress was a stranger to the town. Her dress was fine, and spotless, made from delicate material, and looked like it had been tailored by a professional from a large city. It was unlike the way the rest of the women dressed.

"No, that's gotta be her," he told himself, still frowning. Moving a little closer to her, he tried again. "Luanna?"

Still no response. She didn't even seem to respond to the sound of his footsteps, and with his heavy boots they were difficult to ignore.

It wasn't until he was directly in front of her that she finally recognized him, lifting her head up. Even though her face broke into a smile, she quickly ducked it down, hiding her face under her large bonnet. "Luanna?" he asked, for a third time. "It is you, then?"

There was no immediate response from her, till she lifted her head again and nodded.

"Oh, I'm glad," Nicolas said, a little relieved. He was starting to think that maybe his new bride had gotten cold feet and run away. Maybe taken one look at the town of Gold Creek and decided to stay on the coach. "Can I take your bag for you?" Nicolas asked, noticing that Luanna watched him carefully as he spoke, seemed to be staring at his lips.

She nodded. "Thank you," she said, very softly.

"Are you...are you okay?" he asked, not wanting to pry too much, especially as they'd only just met, but he couldn't shake the feeling

that there was something a little odd about her. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. "Are you feeling okay? Is it the heat? Probably much warmer than what you are used to in Chicago."

She shook her head, still not pulling her eyes away from his face, and his mouth while he was speaking. He found her behaviour quite odd, if he was being honest with himself. *"First she ignores me, pretends not to hear me, and now she can't stop staring at me! Rosella told me she was a sensible woman. Instead it seems as though I've been sent an eccentric!"*

He picked up her bags and smiled at her, reaching out an arm for her to take, being the perfect gentlemen. She smiled shyly and placed her arm gently through his.

"We'll be heading straight towards the church, if that's okay with you..." he started to say, glancing to his left, expecting to see Luanna with her head still bowed, but instead she was staring straight back at him. Nicolas was a little taken aback. "Are you sure okay? You're not feeling ill, are you?" he asked, thinking that she may be a little lightheaded or something.

"No, I'm fine," she replied softly. "I just need to be able to see your lips when you are talking."

Now he was very taken aback. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Well, if you say so..."

She looked a little troubled. "Didn't..." she started to say, the worry showing in her face. "Didn't Rosella say anything to you?"

"About what?" Nicolas asked.

"About me?"

"Well, she said a lot of things," he had to admit. "Would hardly shut up about you, to be honest with you. Kept telling me all manner of wonderful tales about you."

Luanna stopped walking, which also caused Nicolas to stop in his tracks. "So she didn't tell you...everything, then." Now it was time for her to hang her head, and Nicolas could see the spirit drop out of her. "Luanna, what is it?" he asked, concerned. What hadn't Rosella told him? What could be so bad that it was causing Luanna to drop her head in despair?

She didn't seem to be responding to his voice, so he gave a gentle tug on her arm to let her know that it was okay for her to bring her head back up. He wanted to look at her face, to check that everything was okay.

"Rosella didn't tell you that I'm deaf, did she?"

Nicolas tried to hide the shock on his face. No, Rosella had definitely not told him that. He chose his next words carefully, wanting to save face for both himself and Luanna. "She...she told me a little..." he tried to say, but the shock was still showing on his face, and Luanna saw it. She smiled up at him to show him it was okay.

"She didn't tell you. It's alright. I can tell you're very shocked. It's a lot to take in."

He turned his face away, feeling his cheeks blush a little red. "I'm sorry...I just..."

She spoke to him, smiling again. "I need to be able to see you when you speak, if that's okay. That's how I can know what you are saying. Can you turn your face towards mine?"

He smiled, looking a little embarrassed. "Of course that's alright. I'll do my best to remember that, Luanna."

* * *

Luanna held his gaze for a moment, trying to figure out what his expression was really saying. Was he disappointed in her? She wished that Rosella had been more upfront about her condition.

"I wonder if he ever would have wanted me if he'd known," she thought. "No, I need to push thoughts like that aside. I'm here now, and I need to think the best of both my new husband and our new life together."

"Oh, I just wish Rosella had been a little more up front! Then it wouldn't have been such a shock. I can tell he doesn't know what to say, or what to think. I'll need to have a stern word with Rosella when I see her next." But she didn't truly harbor any ill will towards her good friend. She knew that Rosella probably thought she was just helping, doing the right thing, trying to find her a good husband. It wasn't really lying, to be strictly fair. It was just not explaining the whole truth.

As they walked along, Luanna's worries started to rise. What if Nicolas truly was disappointed in her? What if he felt he'd been tricked in some way? *"He's so handsome..."* Luanna thought. *"I'm sure he could get any woman to marry him. He doesn't need someone like me, with my handicap, making life difficult for him."*

There was another worry as well. After all, she knew it wasn't just

her handicap that could cause potential trouble. *"I am going to have to take care to be extra sensible now that I am here. Time to settle down, take things seriously. I'm more than grown up now, so it's time to put all childish and silly things behind me, once and for all."* She stared up at her handsome soon-to-be-husband. *"After all, this is no wild cowboy here beside me. Nicolas is a sensible school teacher, who probably expects decent manners and proper ways at home as well as in school. He doesn't want an unruly wife with a wild imagination, who's always getting herself in trouble."*

She kept one eye on Nicolas as they walked, in case he was speaking to her, but part of her was lost in another world. She was deep into her thoughts, her imagination, as she often was, her mind already racing with all the things that could go wrong, all the calamities waiting to happen.

"What if I have to make dinner for the pastor and his wife, and I ruin it?"

"What if I accidentally leave the gate open, and all the animals escape, and we never find them again, and we lose everything..."

She had to snap back to reality. *"You're doing it again, Luanna. Imagining things that are never going to happen! And doing just the sort of thing you're not supposed to be doing: letting your imagination run away from you."*

As the church loomed in front of them, Luanna really snapped back to real life. "Oh my," she said, looking up at the small, pretty building.

"You like it?" Nicolas asked. "We've just had it all rebuilt and

repainted."

"It's beautiful," Luanna gushed. "So different from the churches in Chicago, but I love it. Oh, I feel at home here already."

Nicolas replied but his face was turned away. She reached out a gentle hand to place on his arm to remind him.

"Oh," he said. "Sorry. I keep doing that."

"You don't need to be sorry," she said. Over his shoulder, she saw the church again, and the enormity of the situation hit her.

"I am about to be married, to take my vows in front of God. Now, more than ever, I must put all childish things behind me, and vow to live a straightforward, sensible life from this point onwards."

She took Nicolas' arm, along with a firm nod, and they entered together.

* * *

Even though it was far from a fairytale, the wedding was everything Luanna could have asked for.

"Yes, there's no grand gown, and no horse drawn carriage," she thought, staring at the handsome man that stood across from her. "But who needs any of that? The most important thing is that I'm here, saying my vows before God. Everything else would only be window dressing. Oh, I can just imagine the splendid life we are going to have here together, in this wild town..."

Luanna suddenly realized everyone was staring at her. She looked

around and realized she'd been so wrapped up in her own day-dreams that she'd forgotten to pay attention to what the Pastor was saying. She sheepishly turned her head to apologize, making sure she could clearly see his lips for the rest of the ceremony.

From the other side of the aisle, Nicolas watched his peculiar new bride with astonishment, mixed with awe.

"She's sure going to shake things up here in Gold Creek," he thought to himself, as he took his vows, looking across at the pretty, strange girl that fate - and God - had sent him all the way from Chicago. *"And I'm not sure I am quite prepared for it!"*

* * *

A SERIES OF MISHAPS

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Gold Creek, 1851, Two Weeks Later

From the stories she'd heard, Luanna thought that life in Gold Creek was supposed to be rough and tough, and Nicolas thought that a big city girl like Luanna might not be prepared for life there. As it turned out, though, Gold Creek was not ready for Luanna.

They immediately thought there was something odd about her. The way she stared directly at a person's face when she spoke to them. Without realizing that she was deaf, people assumed that she was very forward, especially for a woman who was new to the settlement. Luanna, of course, knew that she was expected to be more demure, to turn her face down, or look away, while she was holding a conversation with a stranger, but she couldn't understand what was said if she did that.

"Have you seen that new woman, the wife of the school teacher?" one woman, a lady called Clarabelle asked her companion Betsy one morning, as they strolled along the main street of Gold Creek. "I think she hasn't been raised with any manners at all, the funny way she stares at you while you are talking."

Betsy nodded and covered her mouth with her lace-gloved hand as she whispered back to Clarabelle. "It seems as though she hasn't had any raising at all, doesn't it? Such a strange girl."

"Clumsy, too," Clarabelle replied. "Always running around, knocking into things. Never seems to pay attention to what she's doing."

The two women stopped suddenly and lowered their voices when they saw Luanna turn 'round the corner, carrying a basket between her hands, skipping merrily down the main street towards them. Of course, Luanna wouldn't have been able to hear their gossip even if she'd been right behind them, but the two women didn't know that. They straightened up and smiled, nodding as she went past with friendly "Good mornings" exchanged between the three, but as soon as she was out of - what they assumed was - earshot, they began to gossip again.

"Skipping?" Clarabelle asked, trying to hide her laughter, not wanting to be thought a sight herself. "Why, this girl seems to belong to another world at times."

Betsy kept walking alongside her friend. "I wonder where Nicolas found her," she said, giggling to herself.

Clarabelle giggled too. "Well, he is a bit of an odd character himself, wouldn't you say? No one knows anything much about him, besides the fact that he teaches the school. And if you ask me, I'm not sure he should be teaching all our children. What qualifications does he have? Everyone says that his teaching methods are highly unconventional. This strange wife of his is probably a perfect match for him!"

Clarabelle was so busy rambling on that she didn't even feel Betsy's hand on her dress sleeve, tugging at her to get her attention. "Clarabelle," she whispered, pointing behind them.

"What is it?" She spun around to see Nicolas standing right behind them.

"Mr. Williamson..." she sputtered, blushing a dark shade of red. "Why, hello there." She reached a hand up to her bonnet, touching at her hair to make sure it was all in place, feeling very caught out, not sure how much he had heard.

"Ladies, good morning," he said, dipping his hat to greet them. "Having a pleasant stroll this morning, are we?"

Betsy, also blushing, stammered as she tried to answer. "Y-yes. Thank you. It's a lovely day, isn't it?" Both women stood frozen, hoping that Nicolas would take his leave quickly, both hoping that he hadn't overheard the majority of their conversation.

"It is a lovely day," Nicolas replied, smiling down at the two women. "A lovely day to be out and about, sharing in conversation..."

Clarabelle gulped.

"I don't mind if you two - or anyone else in this town, for that matter - gossip about me. I can take it. But I don't want to ever catch you speaking like that about Luanna again, do you hear me?" His voice was gentle, not totally unkind, but there was an edge to it that made both women stand up a little straighter, made them feel ashamed about the words they had said.

"Luanna will never overhear you, you realize, not in the way that I just did. She's deaf, did you know that?" He looked to and fro between the two women, seeing their faces blush even redder.

"I... I... didn't know," Clarabelle stammered.

"She won't overhear you, as I say, but she can lip read very well

from a distance," Nicolas ended with, raising an eyebrow, and Betsy and Clarabelle were left dumbfounded as he placed his hat back on his head and bid them good day.

As they watched Nicolas walk away, Betsy stated, in horror, "You don't think she...she saw what we said earlier, do you?"

Clarabelle, deeply embarrassed, clasped at her basket and began to walk along swiftly in the opposite direction. "I'm not sure - but we've learned a good lesson here today Betsy! Now, let's not repeat this mistake again."

* * *

It was the most important evening of Luanna's new life as a wife and homemaker, and she had everything prepared and set out for a perfect dinner with the pastor and his wife.

"Dear God," she prayed. *"Please bless us all with a perfect evening tonight."* Nerves played in her stomach and she had to keep careful concentration not to miss any important ingredients. Though she'd cooked for her employers hundreds of times, she felt as nervous as if she'd never cooked a meal in her life.

The most important part of the dinner was her prized creation, her pecan pie. She'd spent over three hours making sure that every detail was right, painstakingly putting together the pastry and the sweet center.

"Now all that's left to do is to bake it!" she thought gleefully, as she opened the oven door to place the pie inside. *"Hmm, I'll think I'll set it on the highest setting - that way the crust will be nice and crispy! I just*

need to remember to check it and get it out on time!"

While the pie was in the oven, Luanna busied herself preparing the other items on the menu. As it was a special occasion, they were having rabbit stew and roasted vegetables. Luanna's stomach growled as she smelled the sweet scent of the roasting pecans, and the smell helped to calm her nerves a little. Everything seemed to be going right.

Nicolas entered the room and Luanna tried to shoo him out. "I don't want you to see the meal until it's all laid out on the table. I want it to be a surprise."

"Well I'm sure it will be a surprise for Pastor John and his wife, and that's what's important," he said, giving his wife an embrace. "It certainly smells impressive, anyway." He lifted the lid on the pot to take a peek and Luanna good-naturedly swatted his hand away.

"Oh, you've ruined it now." She smiled and adjusted her apron. "You're right though, as long as Pastor John likes it. And his new wife, Marabelle, of course. Oh, everyone down at the church says she is a wonderful cook herself...I do hope that I measure up."

"I'm sure she won't be judging," Nicolas reassured her.

"I do want her to be impressed, though," Luanna said, then sighed. "Oh, I suppose that sounds a bit vain though, doesn't it? I should simply be worried about doing my best, not about being better than someone else."

"You were a professional cook before you came here, remember," Nicolas replied, grinning. He'd meant the comment as a compliment

but he could see from the crestfallen look on Luanna's face that she hadn't taken it that way.

"Yes, just a common servant before I came here, I remember," Luanna replied softly.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that, Luanna. I was just trying to reassure you that you're capable of cooking a wonderful meal. That you have nothing to be worried about."

She remained quiet for a moment, keeping her head tilted down, so that she didn't hear Nicolas apologizing again. He felt terrible that he'd made her feel bad about her past, as though she somehow wasn't good enough. He knew some of the women in town talked and gossiped about her - he'd overheard them - but he didn't think Luanna had anything to be ashamed of. Besides, he knew that Marabelle was a kind and gracious woman, and wouldn't have a bad thought about Luanna, despite any of her oddities.

He reached out a hand and gently tilted Luanna's chin so that she was looking at him and could read his lips. "Luanna, I think you missed what I said."

"I'm sorry," she replied. "I'm just feeling so anxious about this evening."

"I know," he said, having an idea. "Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air, and collect some flowers to set on the table?"

Luanna's eyes brightened. She clasped her hands together. "Oh, that's a wonderful idea. All the new wildflowers in bloom, down by the creek..."

"I don't think you have time to go all the way down to the creek," Nicolas said, frowning. "It's a half hour's walk, at least, and our guests will be arriving before you've had time to return..."

Luanna untied her apron and flung it onto the table, already getting carried away with the idea of travelling to the creek. "Oh, but all the preparation is already done, and if I go quickly, if I run, I'll have time."

"Run?" Nicolas thought. *"Oh, she will look a sight."* But he was far more concerned over the fact that Luanna would not be back in time for dinner. It would be rude to keep their guests waiting.

"Luanna, just pick the flowers in the nearby field. Don't you think that's the more sensible option?"

She stopped tying her bonnet on and thought for a moment. "Yes. You're right." She let out a long breath. "It is a bit silly to go all the way down to the creek. I'll just go over to the next field, then come straight back."

Nicolas relaxed a little. "I think that sounds like a good idea. I'll see you soon."

* * *

Luanna looked back over her shoulder as she surveyed the flowers in the nearby field. *"Oh, these ones aren't nearly as pretty, though..."* she thought, her heart aching to run down to the creek to pick the fine, beautiful wildflowers that grew down there.

"After all, it is a special occasion. I know Nicolas thinks I shouldn't,

but when he sees how beautiful the flowers are, and how impressed John and Marabelle are, he will forgive me. He'll be pleased, in fact," she said, convincing herself. "Everything is prepared and out of the oven, so I've got time if I run down there as fast as I can."

Taking one last glance at the house over her shoulder, she made the decision and began to run over the fields, down the hills and over the rocky earth, to the creek bed where the wildflowers grew.

* * *

Heading back up the hill, Luanna had to slow down in order to catch her breath. She was feeling quite hot as she clutched the flowers in one hand and tried to rearrange her hair with the other. *"Oh, I must look quite a state," she thought, fretting. "Perhaps this wasn't the right choice after all. Oh, but these flowers do look so pretty. And Nicolas will love them, and..."*

She stopped still in her tracks, the flowers falling to the earth and scattering as she brought her hands up to her mouth. There in front of her stood their house, normal as usual, except for the blankets of black smoke billowing out the windows.

"What on Earth..." she gasped, looking at the scene as she saw Nicolas run out the front, coughing and spluttering. He was doubled over, trying to wave the smoke away, and she stood and watched him as he first stopped and draped a scarf around his face and mouth to keep out the smoke, then ran back into the house, before returning outside with a small, blackened item that he threw to the ground and poured a bucket of water over.

Luanna gasped again. "The pie!"

Things were about to get even worse, though. Down the path she saw Pastor John and Marabelle walking towards the house, both of them gaping open-mouthed at the scene.

Luanna took a step backwards into the corn field, wishing that the ground would open up and a giant hole would swallow her up. She couldn't believe what was happening.

"Oh, how could I forget about the pie?" she thought in despair. *"My prized item!"* She looked on as Nicolas spoke to John and Marabelle, seeming to explain the situation to them. They spoke for a minute or two, nodding as though they understood, then the two guests turned around and walked back down the lane.

Luanna was horrified. *"Oh, the entire meal must be ruined. And there is still smoke billowing out from all the windows! Oh, what have I done?"*

* * *

Luanna returned to the house dragging her feet, wishing the journey would take a hundred years, she was so ashamed about what she was going to face. She quietly peeked her head into the kitchen. The smoke was thinning out, but there was ash everywhere, and all the food she had spent so long preparing sat on the table, cold and burnt and probably inedible.

Nicolas heard her and came bounding in. "Luanna! I was worried about you. Where on Earth did you get to?"

"I'm so sorry," she said, dropping her head into her hands. She was so ashamed that she couldn't bear to lift her head, so she missed what Nicolas said to her in return. "I was daydreaming, as per usual, and I

just totally lost track of the time..."

"Lost track of the time?" he asked.

"I went all the way down to the creek," she admitted. "Oh, I know I shouldn't have, it was so foolish of me. I was being so silly, and vain, wanting to have the best centerpiece for the dinner. And now look what's happened - there's no dinner at all! Oh, it serves me right."

"Luanna..." he said, with some exasperation. "You went all the way down to the creek?"

Luanna was devastated. "Oh, I can't believe I've done this. I can never show my face in town again after this! Everyone will be talking about it, for the rest of the year!"

He reached out and gently lifted her head up so that she could read his lips. He wiped away the tear that had fallen down her cheek. Much to her surprise, she found that his face had broken into a grin, then laughter.

"What?" she asked, before joining in. Laughter began to grip her body and soon she was laughing hard and strong. Soon the tears that were spilling down her face were tears of laughter, not sadness. Soon she was doubled over and truly seeing the funny side of it all.

"Oh," she said, wiping away her tears. "I suppose it was a bit funny after all...but still, so embarrassing. What am I going to do?"

Nicolas shook his head, still laughing gently. "I don't know Luanna...I don't know what I'm going to do with you either. Life sure isn't dull around here now that you've arrived."

She bit her lip a little and looked down, before bringing her face back up. "Is that a good thing?" she asked, unsurely.

He raised his eyebrows. "It can be."

"Can be?"

"I'm certainly never bored."

Luanna felt a little worried for a second. She was half-scared that 'bored' was actually what Nicolas wanted. After all, he wanted a sensible bride, not a wild, reckless one.

"Of course it's good not to be bored," he replied gently, putting Luanna's mind at ease. "Who wants to be bored?"

* * *

"He's so kind not to get mad with me when I make mistakes like that," Luanna thought happily as she hung the washing up to dry. *"Even though I know deep down he must be a bit dismayed. To be embarrassed like that in front of the pastor and his wife! Of all people. Still, I'm glad we could laugh about it in the end."*

To show how grateful she was, Luanna vowed to be extra vigilant for the rest of the week. "I'm going to take extra care with all my duties, no more mistakes," she vowed out loud, pleased with this idea.

Luanna had just one task left to do that morning. A few weeks earlier, Nicolas had returned to the farm one evening, not by foot but via wagon, as he'd had a surprise for Luanna. Five hens, so that they could farm their own eggs. Luanna had been delighted, and it had been her job ever since to collect the eggs, to feed the chickens, and to

make sure they were locked up at night.

Finished with her washing, she put the basket down and walked 'round to the pen where the hens were kept, and dutifully walked around, making sure they all had their fair share of feed. "Good chickens," she said, smiling down at them.

Off in the distance, the sight of something suddenly caught her eye. "*That looks like Rosella,*" she thought, straining to see. "Oh, and she's brought her baby with her as well!" Luanna, excited at the sight of her friend, dropped the bucket of chicken feed and said a quick goodbye to the hens before running back down the path, not hearing their clucking and squawking behind her as she bounded away, merrily, lost in a daze.

* * *

Nighttime began to fall, and Luanna made her rounds of their small farm, stopping at the chicken pen to make sure the hens were locked up safe and sound.

She got there to find the gate unlocked, and the pen empty.

"Noooooooo...." she whispered, bringing her hands up to her face. "I must have forgotten to shut the gate earlier, when Rosella appeared." She shook her head. "Oh, this can't be happening..." Spinning around, she double checked the pen. Empty. "No, no no...."

She ran from the paddock out into the lane besides the house. No sign of any of the hens anywhere. "Oh no, what is Nicolas going to say?"

She lifted the hem of her long skirt up so that she could run freely, not caring about what she must have looked like as she bolted down the lane.

"Hens!" she called, looking around frantically, "Where have you gone to?" Of course, she was unable to hear any noise the hens might have been making, so she had only her eyes to rely on. She felt tears spring to her eyes as she continued to search around frantically. "Oh, why was I so stupid?" she asked out loud, hardly believing what had happened. Just when she had vowed to be on her best behaviour as well.

"Nicolas was understanding about the dinner, but this is another matter," she thought, still hiking her skirt up as she ran around the muddy paddocks, searching for the missing hens. *"He's going to think I'm so absentminded to have let this happen."*

It was starting to get dark out, and without noise to help guide her to where the chickens were hiding, Luanna had no other choice but to go back to the house, defeated and devastated about what had happened.

Nicolas returned home only to be met with dismay. He knew immediately something was wrong; he dropped his bag full of books onto the dining table, racing over to Luanna to comfort her. "What's wrong?" he asked, but by that stage she had her face buried in her hands and she didn't hear him.

Bringing her face up, Nicolas saw it was a blur of tears. "You'd better tell me what is wrong," he said, concerned. "So I can help. Please, Luanna, tell me what has happened. Have you had an accident or something?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Well, yes, sort of. It was an accident..."

"Tell me what happened, you're worrying me."

With tears still running down her face she explained the whole sorry story. Finishing up, she started to cry again. "It was an accident, you've got to believe me."

"Oh, I believe it was an accident alright," Nicolas said, his face dark and his voice low. "That's the trouble, Luanna. Too many accidents! You're so absentminded, all sorts of trouble can happen. It's one thing to ruin a meal, but to lose all our chickens?"

"I'm sorry..." Luanna said, struggling to keep up with Nicolas' lip reading when he spoke so quickly. But she could grasp most of it, and she knew he was mad.

Nicolas cut her off. He couldn't believe she'd been so careless to leave the chicken pen open, and emotion had quickly taken over him. "You know you need to be extra careful, Luanna!"

"Extra careful?" she asked, double-checking she'd understood the right thing. Standing up right, she crossed her arms over her chest and asked, "What does that mean?"

"With your condition!" he sputtered.

"You mean with me being deaf?"

"Yes," he replied. He'd not meant to bring it up, not like this, and he hated the words as he said them, but he continued on. "You need to take extra care, to be more careful than other people are."

"Oh, because I'm so different from other people?"

"Yes, Luanna, you are!" He stopped when he saw the look on her face, the way her chin was trembling, threatening to break into sobs again. "I mean...Luanna, I just mean...take the chickens, for example. You probably lost them partly because you couldn't hear them. Didn't hear them escape, and then couldn't hear where they had gotten to. That's all I mean. Someone who could hear might not need to be so careful."

"Anyone could have let those chickens out, Nicolas, whether they can hear or not! What does my disability have to do with anything?"

"Anyone could have done it, yes, but would anyone? It seems like this sort of trouble just follows you around, Luanna."

"So you think I am completely hopeless, then?"

"I think you don't pay attention to what you're doing, and accidents like this tend to happen a lot with you..." Nicolas didn't mean the things he said, didn't want to insult his wife, didn't want to hurt her, but he was overcome. He couldn't believe they'd lost all their chickens, just as the result of absentmindedness. He grabbed his hat and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Luanna called out.

"I'm going to try and find the hens," he called, with his back turned, and Luanna didn't hear him, couldn't read his lips.

"Nicolas!" she called after him.

He halted, realizing she wouldn't have heard what he said. For a

split second he considered pressing on anyway, leaving without an explanation. No, that was no way to solve matters, he told himself. Running out without an explanation. What kind of man would do something like that? He turned back around. "I'm going out to find the hens, if I can." His voice was lower and gentler now. "I'll be able to hear them at least." He saw her wince. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Oh, what good would I be to you?"

"Luanna, please don't be like that." He took his hat back off for a second and looked at her, his eyes sorry. "I didn't mean what I said."

"Yes, you did."

He sighed. "Maybe, but only in the sense that I'm worried about you. Whether you like to hear it or not, you do need to be extra careful. You could end up hurt, or anything. I worry about you, that's all. If something happened to you I would be devastated. The hens are one thing...but what if you get hurt or injured one day because you are not paying attention, and you can't listen out for danger?"

"That's not going to happen," she said, her voice softening. "You don't need to worry about that, Nicolas." She took a few steps closer to him, seeing that his distress was genuine.

"It could, you know." He hung his head a little. "You might not realize it - I know that you think everything is fun and games, and you see the world in such a lighthearted way, but bad things can happen."

"I know bad things can happen," she replied softly. "Don't worry about that. But nothing bad is going to happen to me."

He looked up at her again. "Do you promise me you'll be more careful? It's not about the hens, or the dinner, or anything like that. But just for your own safety."

She nodded a little, a slight smile coming to her face. "Okay, I promise. I will take extra care from now on."

He let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear it, Luanna. Please don't take any of this to mean that I...judge you for your handicap, or that I think less of you."

"I don't think that. You were only speaking in anger, I know that."

"I was just worried."

She nodded. "It's all okay now. So, should we go and find these hens then?"

His face brightened a little. "So you will come?"

"Of course," she said, smiling brightly now. "Two heads are better than one, and I don't want you going out there all alone when I am perfectly capable of helping."

"Of course you are," he said, reaching for her hand. "Come, let's go together."

* * *

With the hens located they headed back home, walking along together under the moonlit sky. Luanna had never seen so many stars in her life. They took her away from the moment and soon she was busy day-dreaming, lost in her own thoughts. One thing was playing

on her mind more than anything else. How worried Nicolas had been that she might hurt herself one day.

"I've vowed to be more careful," she thought, "but last time I vowed that - today! - I ended up losing all of our chickens." Still gazing upwards, she began to imagine all the other things that could possibly go wrong. But worse than that, she doubted herself. She didn't trust herself not to get into trouble. *"I make promises all the time that I'm going to be good, and sensible, and stay out of trouble...and it never works out!"* There was more at stake now: her husband as well as herself. She didn't want to let him down. Didn't want him to worry.

She was so busy gazing up at the stars, so lost in her own thoughts that she missed the fact that Nicolas was talking besides her. He put his gentle hand on her arm to let her know she needed to look at him.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm looking now. What were you saying? I can't see you too well in the dark, to read your lips."

"Oh, nothing too important, don't worry. Were you lost in your own thoughts?" he asked. "Staring up at the sky?"

"I've just never seen a clear sky like that. It seems so magical, out here. So different from the city. Do you think we'll live here forever? In Gold Creek, I mean," Luanna asked.

Nicolas coughed for a second before answering. "Yes. I don't see why not."

She furrowed her brow for a minute while they continued walking in the warm evening. "You never told me much about your life before

you came here."

When there was no answer, Luanna squinted up at his lips to make sure she wasn't missing anything. "Nicolas?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

He wrapped an arm around her. "Yes, of course," he replied quickly. Then, with a brisk smile he said, "There's just nothing much to tell about my life before Gold Creek. Very quiet and uneventful."

"Hmmm," Luanna replied. "Really? Nothing happened at all before you came here?"

"Nothing at all."

Luanna squeezed his arm. "I suppose you must have led quite a boring life until I came along."

He chuckled a little. In a way she was right. But there was still a lot that he was holding back from her. Luanna kept talking. "I really do promise that I will be more careful. You're right - something bad could happen. Something worse than simply losing livestock."

He leaned over and kissed her gently on the top of her head. Then, making sure she was able to read his lips, he said, "You don't need to change too much, though. Your spontaneity is a good thing."

But as he gazed over the wild land that spread out as far as the eye could see, he didn't feel so sure. From his wild past he knew that spontaneity could lead to big trouble.

AN ACCIDENT

* * *

Gold Creek, 1851, Three Weeks Later.

One morning, Nicolas headed out of the house bright and early, intending to get a head start on his duties for the day. The term was coming to an end and he had a bunch of anxious students requiring extra tutoring before exam season began. These days Nicolas didn't know who was more unruly - his students or his new wife. They could each give the other a run for their money. Nicolas felt overstressed and overworked, but he was trying not to let it show, or to let on to Luanna how he was feeling. As far as she knew he was an old hand at being a school teacher - if he let on that he was feeling overwhelmed by the work, that would only lead to more questions. He didn't want his students knowing either, nor their parents. He had to keep up the facade that he was a professional, that this was all second nature to him.

Still, walking down to the school just after the break of dawn would get people talking, so he was glad the street was quiet and empty as he shuffled his way to the school house.

He stopped. He could have sworn he'd heard footsteps right behind him. But there had been no one about, no one awake, when he'd checked a moment ago. He spun around, trying to see who was there.

No one.

Perhaps he'd imagined it.

He turned back around. Kept walking for a few paces. There they were again, those same heavy footsteps. A jolt of fear ran straight to Nicolas' heart as his blood ran cold. He felt as though he recognised those footsteps, could tell whose boots they were by the heavy, lazy way they hit the road, and the crunch they made as the heel turned.

This time he looked around, slowly, surely, as though he'd been waiting for this moment, knowing that eventually the past was going to catch up with him like this.

"Clancy," he whispered, staring at the tall, dark figure before him.

"Well, hello there Nicky," the man said, a menacing, sly grin, taking over his face. "It's been a while between drinks, hasn't it?"

* * *

Luanna was trying her best to keep out of trouble, and since the incident with the hens, had managed to avoid any further disasters. She was walking down the street with her friend Rosella, telling her about all the care she taking to ensure there would be no more accidents, or trouble.

"Oh, but you can't be too careful, all the time," Rosella said. "Don't try to change who you are too much, Luanna. You're so wonderful just as you are. Nicolas knows that too, you do realize?"

"I know he does, deep down, but I do try his patience at times, I can tell. But, everything has been so wonderful lately, and I've been sticking to the vow I made to him, to be extra careful to avoid accidents."

"As long as you're being true to yourself," Rosella commented.

Luanna had to wonder about that. It took up a great deal of energy for her to be careful and sensible all the time, always monitoring her every move. Still, she didn't think anything bad could come out of being more cautious. There was nothing wrong with compromising, and her promise to remain careful was partly to do with her handicap. Nicolas only had her best interests at heart, her safety. He didn't want to lose her.

"Ooh, what's that?" Luanna suddenly gasped, seeing a new stall of some kind, set up outside near the general store. She brought her hands up to her face in delight. "Oh, it looks as though they are selling new hats, Rosella. Oh, I haven't seen garments this grand since I was in Chicago."

"Luanna, we're supposed to be meeting the other ladies at the Church in five minutes, we can look at the hats later on," Rosella tried to protest, but Luanna was already fast on her way, drawn to the fine display of hats with their purple velvet, feathers and jewels. She'd never seen items like this for sale in Gold Creek, and she was drawn to them like a moth to a flame.

So busy was she, that she didn't see - nor hear - the horse and wagon turn violently into the street, heading towards Luanna so fast there was no time to stop.

From behind her Rosella screamed out to Luanna, "WATCH OUT!" But it was no good, and Luanna was knocked over and sent flying, her body hitting the ground with an unholy thud before she was thrown over, rolling over and over till she stopped, her body still. Rosella gasped and yelled for help.

Nicolas, just finished his teaching duties for the day, had his own mind a million miles away that day. All he could think about was Clancy, appearing out of nowhere like that. Back to torture him.

"How on earth did he track me down?" Nicolas thought, closing the school gate behind him on the way out. When Clancy had approached him that morning he'd taken off as quickly as he could, trying to pretend as though he didn't even recognize the man. Nicolas himself was almost unrecognizable from the man he had once been. His previously long hair was now cut short, and he'd traded in his leathers for suede. Dirt for soap.

But Clancy had recognized him, there was no doubt about it. He knew Nicolas and Big Nicky were the same person, and there could be only one reason Clancy was back.

He wanted his money.

"I'll have to find a way of getting it to him, without Luanna knowing," Nicolas thought, his head turned down as he entered the main part of town.

Nicolas had just turned onto the main street, intent on stopping at the General Store for some groceries before returning home. When he heard all the commotion and screaming he stopped and looked around, wondering what on earth was going on. A bad feeling began to settle in his stomach. Without even seeing anything, or without needing to be told, he knew. He knew something had happened to Luanna.

He saw the body laying limp in the middle of the road. "Luanna..." he whispered, dropping his books on the ground before he ran

towards her. As he approached Benjamin tried to hold him back, tried to stop him from seeing. "Let's wait for Doc, okay, it won't do any good if you..." But Nicolas broke free from the other man's grip and ran towards his wife, kneeling down beside her body.

"Luanna...." he gasped, reaching out to brush the hair away from her forehead. Her bonnet had been knocked clean off, and there was a gash across her face where she had hit the ground. "Oh, Luanna, please be okay..." He looked down at her chest to check if she was still breathing. At first it seemed as though she was totally still, and his heart just about stopped beating as panic gripped him. But then he saw the gentle rise and fall of her breath and realized there was still life in her body.

He leaned his head forward and shut his eyes tight. He thanked God that she was still breathing, and prayed further that she would survive. Her eyes were fast shut and she wasn't responding in any other way. *"Please, God, let her be okay..."* Around him, the noise of the crowd was drowned out as all he could think about was life without Luanna. He couldn't imagine such a fate.

With his eyes still shut he felt an arm brush past him and he was knocked out of the way. He pulled his eyes open. Doc. The older man quickly set about checking for Luanna's pulse, opening her eyelids to check for signs of consciousness.

"Is she going to be okay?" Nicolas asked, frantic.

"I'm not sure yet," Doc replied, preoccupied. "Give me a chance to take a good look at her. Move out of the way, son."

Nicolas slowly rose to his feet, his legs shaky underneath him. He

couldn't believe what was happening. It was as though all his worst fears had come true. *"I warned her that something would happen, an accident of some sort, if she wasn't more careful..."* he thought as he backed away from the body, unable to take his eyes off the terrible sight.

Behind him, he bumped into Rosella, who was also staring down at the body, frozen in her own terrible thoughts. "Nicolas, I'm so sorry, I tried to call out to her, but...but of course, she didn't hear me and..."

Nicolas spun around. "How did this happen?" His eyes were wild as he spoke, and his usually neat sandy blonde hair fell down into his face, obscuring his eyes.

"She...she was wandering off down the road..." Rosella began to explain, unable to form the words properly. Rosella - The Silent Horse Whisperer - still had trouble speaking when she got nervous. She clammed up slightly as she tried to explain to Nicolas what had happened. It had all taken place too quickly, and she felt as though she was partly to blame.

"I suppose she wasn't watching where she was going?" Nicolas asked.

Rosella shook her head.

"Lost in her own world like usual," he stated, not even waiting for an answer. He could imagine exactly what had happened. "I told her to be more careful." He dropped his head and his hat came tumbling off, hitting the dusty road beneath him, before blowing away. He didn't even bother to retrieve it.

"Nicolas..." Rosella said gently, pointing behind him towards Luanna. "Look, she's waking up..."

He spun around, his heart racing. There, Luanna, with the aid of Doc, was gently sitting up, her eyes open. Nicolas pushed past the crowd to get back to her, telling everyone to back off as he did so. "Give her some space, please!" he said, agitated. He just wanted everyone else to leave. *"Why can't everyone in this town just mind their own business for once? Don't they have anything better to do with their time?"*

"Luanna..." he said, kneeling down beside her again. He turned her face up so that she could see him and understand what he was saying. He saw that her eyes looked groggy and unfocused as he tried to get her head steady. Turning to Doc for a second he asked, "Is she okay? Is this normal?"

"She hit her head very badly. But she seems okay. If she can open her eyes and keep them open, that is a good sign. Try talking to her."

"I can try," Nicolas said, still feeling exasperated. "But she can't hear me unless she is looking at me, and she can't seem to focus her eyes." He tried anyway. "Luanna, please stay with me. We need to get you home." He held her face in position so that it was still, focused directly on his own face. "I am going to get you on your feet, and then we need to get home. Do you think you can walk?"

She nodded her head gently. "Yes..." she whispered. "I am okay... you don't need to fuss so much."

"Don't need to fuss so much? You almost died out here," Nicolas thought, but he didn't say anything. He was just focused on getting

Luanna home safe and sound. He pulled her up to the ground and placed her right arm over his shoulder, so that he could support her weight as they walked. "Move back," he said to the crowd, and they obliged. Rosella helped out, making sure the path was clear as Nicolas carried Luanna home.

"Is she okay?" Rosella whispered as they passed, her voice still shaking.

"We'll have to wait and see," Nicolas replied, shortly. He didn't care about anyone else right then, he just wanted to get his wife away from all of them. Away from the throng of spectators, Luanna started to recover a little, and was able to speak. "I'm okay, really, I think I just had a knock." She reached up and felt her head, noticed the bump and the cut. "Oh goodness, am I bleeding?"

"Yes," Nicolas said quickly, not wishing to focus on that. "Just one reason we need to get you home as quickly as possible."

"What happened?" she asked, still feeling the bump on her head.

"You don't remember?" Nicolas asked, shocked. "You were knocked clear out by that wagon."

"I can't...I can't remember it happening," she said, drowsily. "One second I was just walking down the street, the next I was waking up on the ground, with Doc staring at me. Oh my, it must have been so embarrassing..." she said, wondering at the scene she must have caused. "Oh, everyone will be talking about this, won't they?"

"That's the least of your troubles," Nicolas replied gruffly.

Though Luanna couldn't hear the tone in his voice she could read the look on his face. "Are you angry at me?" she asked, dismayed. "Nicolas, I've had a bad accident, how can you be cross like this?"

"Another accident, yes. That's the trouble, right there."

She opened her mouth in shock, still unable to process what had happened to her, or why her husband was displaying such anger over the incident. "Why are you...?"

"All you're worried about is that it may have been embarrassing," Nicolas snapped. "When I was worried you might have died. Luanna, I told you time and time again to be more careful, and you promised you would be." He stopped walking and stared at her for a long second. "You promised."

He turned his head away and kept walking.

* * *

Luanna lay awake, with worries on her mind. Doc had been by the house to check that she was okay, and had prescribed her a week's worth of bed rest. It sounded terrible to her. "*So boring,*" she thought. "*A week of lying down! What will I do to amuse myself? I will have my books I suppose...*" But this was far from the only thing on her mind. She couldn't bear to go to sleep with Nicolas mad at her.

"*This isn't the way to handle things,*" she thought. "*Not speaking about them.*" But the sun was just about to set and it would be difficult for her to lip read in the fading light. She continued to lie there, worrying about things. One of the downsides of having a good imagination was that those imaginings could turn bad. "*What if Nicolas is so mad with*

me he never wants to speak to me again?" She quickly put the thought aside as silly, but there was a bad feeling in her stomach that wouldn't leave her. Eventually she threw the covers of her and stood up.

"Oh, who cares what Doc says...I feel alright, and I can't sleep anyway. What good will resting do for a sore head?" she thought, putting her slippers on and shuffling out to the room where Nicolas was sitting up, going over his lessons and reading.

He started at the sight of her and took off his reading spectacles.

He slowly got to his feet. "Luanna, you're not supposed to be up." He had candles lit on the table, to help him read, and Luanna was able to make out his words in the dim light. "Doc said you're supposed to stay in bed."

"Oh, I feel fine," she said. "I can't sleep anyway."

"Is your head alright?" he asked, concerned, walking over to her. He squinted and looked up at the cut, which had been bandaged up by Doc.

"My head is a little sore, but that's not why I couldn't sleep," she explained.

"What is it then?"

"Don't you know? Don't you understand?"

"Understand what?"

Luanna shook her head. "You don't understand that I can't sleep when I feel like things are bad between us? I keep thinking that you're

so mad that you might...that you might run off in the middle of the night or something!" As she said it she started to realize how ridiculous it sounded and she ended with a little laugh. Across from her Nicolas also let out a little laugh.

"Luanna, I would never do that. That...that's madness to think that."

She reached up and touched her head. "Yes, you're right. It does sound a little silly, doesn't it?" She sighed. "That's my imagination again, running wild." She stopped and looked up at him with sorrowful eyes. "That's what happened today, you were right. It's coming back to me a little bit, and I can remember what happened. I was day-dreaming, of course, and I didn't hear the wagon coming towards me." She swallowed, the emotion taking over her. "Nicolas, I'm so sorry. I know I promised to be extra careful, and I've let you down so badly." Tears flashed in her eyes. "Can you forgive me?"

He reached out his arms and took her in his warm embrace. "Shh, of course I do," he said gently. "I was just scared before. When I saw you laying there on the ground, with your body lifeless, I thought the life might leave me as well. It was the worst thing I have ever seen."

She broke the embrace and stood back. "Did you say something?"

"Oh," he said, taking his arms away. "I...forgot. Sorry. I forgive you, Luanna, of course I do. Do you forgive me? I didn't mean to get so cross, or speak to you shortly. I was terrified that you could have been killed."

She nodded. "I understand. It must have been very frightening for you, to see me like that. I can't imagine. If it had been you I would

have been cross as well, in my own way. If you could have done something to avoid it, like I could have. Really, Nicolas, I have learned my lesson now. Today was a terrible shock, and a grave lesson. I know, with my condition, that I need to take extra care to avoid disaster."

They embraced again before Luanna finally returned to bed, this time able to sleep soundly, her mind calm and her body exhausted.

* * *

A DISCOVERY

* * *

Gold Creek, Six Weeks Later, 1851.

Things had settled down a bit for Luanna during the next couple of months, but the more sensible that she tried to be, the more bored she became. She was spending all her time reading and sewing, making lots of things, but she longed for more adventure. She wished deep down that she could be more 'free', that her deafness wasn't holding her back so much. She also wished that that Nicolas could realize that she longed to be a bit freer. Longed for more adventure in her life.

Every day she stood and watched as Nicolas went off to his teaching job, wondering if she could ever be the perfect woman that a man like him deserved. Though she was trying, deep down she still felt like a failure, felt like her deafness, her clumsiness and her absentmindedness were all scars that she wore on the surface. So no matter how hard she tried, it was obvious that she wasn't good enough.

"Have a wonderful day today," Luanna said, giving her husband a peck on the cheek. "I hope those children don't give you too much trouble today."

"Nothing that I can't handle."

"I know."

"What do you have planned for the day?" Nicolas asked, picking up his bag full of books. "I hope you're still taking a bit of rest."

Luanna sighed inwardly, but she didn't wish to let her frustration show on the surface. It had been six weeks since her accident and still Nicolas was wrapping her in cotton wool. Why did he have to be so sensible all the dang time?

"A bit of spring cleaning, perhaps," Luanna said. She was still supposed to be on light duties, so no farm work was allowed. But she intended on giving the house a thorough cleaning from top to bottom as a bit of a surprise for Nicolas when he returned home. "Nothing too strenuous, I promise."

He gave her a peck on the cheek and nodded. "Just take it easy, then."

She waved goodbye as he went up the path and then set about getting to work. *"He won't know how hard I'm working, if I get it all done before he gets home. Then it will be a wonderful surprise for when he returns."*

There was one dusty area of the house she couldn't wait to get her hands on - an old cupboard full of drawers where Nicolas kept all the boring documents and items, like bank details that Luanna wasn't much interested in. So the area got a little neglected, unlike the parts of the house she found far more interesting, like the bookshelf. She started pulling out drawers, moving aside mountains of paper and books till she got to a small gold tin box.

Shaking it, she picked it up and listened to it, wondering what the contents might be. *"Strange, it seems to be locked."*

She put it down and fiddled with the lock for a moment before it sprang open. "Oh," she exclaimed, not expecting it to be that easy.

"Well, I suppose it can't be that private if the lock doesn't work. Besides, I am Nicolas's wife, and we shouldn't have any secrets between us. We don't have secrets, as far as I am aware..."

She opened the box and took out the photograph on top, an old faded picture of a man in cowboy boots and black leather, with longish sandy-blonde hair, two holsters on each side.

She dropped it like it was boiling hot. "Nooooo..." she murmured. "This can't be?"

She picked the photo back up and turned it over. "Big Nicky", it said.

"Is Big Nicky...Nicolas?" she thought, turning the photo back over in disbelief. The man on the other side of the photo was both completely familiar yet totally foreign at the same time.

She sifted through the rest of the tin. It was full of all kinds of documents, photos, letters and journals, documenting Nicolas' previous life as a wild cowboy. Luanna's eyes almost popped out of her head as she read the letters and journals. *"Why, this is more exciting than anything I have ever read in a novel!"* she thought to herself, reading over the pages as quickly as her eyes could move. When she got to the bottom of the tin she just sat there, dumbstruck.

"How is any of this possible?" she thought, in awe. *"My husband, the mild mannered school teacher. Why, it's like he has a secret identity."*

She flipped through the papers again, trying to get her mind around it all. *"I wonder if I should be mad at him, for keeping this all from me..."* But she didn't feel mad. After all, Nicolas hadn't lied about his

past, just avoided mentioning it whenever it got brought up. If anything, she felt secretly pleased that her husband had this wild past.

"But I wonder..." she thought, placing the tin beside her, *"if he still has this wild streak? Can he really be happy here in Gold Creek, as a school teacher, when he is used to this sort of life?"*

She had to ponder the matter for a good while. She decided there must have been a good reason that he kept his past a secret, from her and from everyone else in the town. Surely he wouldn't want his students knowing about any of it? They'd be scared. And if the parents found out they'd lose all trust in the new teacher. Nicolas was a respectable member of a small community now, and people would be shocked to find out about his past.

But perhaps it was more than that...

Luanna had a bad feeling that she just couldn't shake. It was one thing to be a little embarrassed about a past, and to want to put it behind you to make a fresh start. But keeping it such a secret? With all evidence of it in a locked box? And never mentioning it at all?

Maybe there was some deeper reason he was keeping it all a secret.

Maybe he was in trouble. Maybe they both were.

Luanna picked the tin box up and quickly put it back where she had found it. *"There, it's safe where I found it, it's as though I never discovered it,"* she thought, pushing the drawer shut, as though that would keep the secrets safe and locked away, and would keep the past from coming back to haunt them. She had a feeling there was more to

the story.

"He must have had a good reason for not telling me..."

Luanna wandered into the kitchen, but as she chopped and prepared for the dinner her old friend, her runaway imagination, returned to keep her company. *"What if one of these men returns, tracks Nicolas down? What if they find him here in Gold Creek...?"*

She shook her head to try to clear her thoughts. "Luanna, you're being silly again," she said out loud, returning to the vegetables she was preparing to boil on the stove. "Now you really are talking like this is something out of a novel. Surely Nicolas isn't on the run, or anything like that! He's not hiding out here in Gold Creek, he just moved here. For a fresh start. No, nothing bad is going to happen."

But as the water boiled over and Luanna almost scalded her hand while distracted, she wasn't so sure.

Was it just her over-active imagination? Or could her husband really be in some sort of trouble?

* * *

"You're looking very excitable," Nicolas commented to Luanna as he entered the house that night. Glancing around, he noticed that the house was sparkling clean. "Wow," he said, admiring her hard work. "I hope you didn't go to too much trouble though, or strain yourself."

"Don't be silly," Luanna replied, glad that her husband was pleased. "It wasn't much trouble, and besides, the house needed a thorough cleaning."

"Thorough?" Nicolas asked, setting his bag down and walking around the house. "Just...how thorough?" He tried to act casual, as though he wasn't too bothered, but all he could think about was his cabinet, and the box he kept hidden in the bottom drawer.

"Fairly thorough," Luanna replied, following Nicolas so that she could see him talk.

"Did you clean everything?" Nicolas asked, still trying to keep his voice casual.

"Pretty much." She looked up at him and grinned, in a way like she had a little secret she was longing to tell.

Nicolas felt a pang in his stomach. "*She can't have found the tin box, can she?*" He wondered for a second, then decided, no, she can't have. That wasn't the kind of thing a person could discover and then keep quiet about. It would have been the first thing she'd said when he'd burst through the door.

But there was that strange grin on her lips...

Nicolas gulped and decided to drop the subject. After all, bringing it up would only raise more questions than it would answer. And he already had enough to worry about. Clancy was back, and he wanted his money, the share he thought he was owed from their time together. When Nicolas had sold up all his old property - or, the little he'd owned - including his horse, his guns, and his old Stetson, Clancy considered half the money his, as he'd taken Nicolas under his wing when Nicolas had been just a boy. But that had been before Nicolas knew any better. Clancy had taken him in when he'd had nowhere to go, yes, but as Nicolas had grown up, he'd realized that Clancy didn't

do everything by the law, and Nicolas had to get away. He'd left that life, and Clancy, behind, to start over in Gold Creek.

But now Clancy was threatening to tell everyone: the students, their parents, and Luanna, about the life Nicolas had escaped from, unless he paid up. That, or, he'd given Nicolas a second option: return to the land with him, return to his old life.

Nicolas had been raised wild, but he was no outlaw, and he didn't want to live that way anymore. Still, deep down, he had to wonder if he was only pretending, here in this nice house, with his nice wife. Sometimes he felt like a fraud, and didn't know if he even deserved to start over.

But he had Luanna to worry about now. So he had to put thoughts like that aside, and look ahead.

He just prayed she hadn't found that box.

* * *

A CONFRONTATION

* * *

Gold Creek, One Month Later, 1851

After Luanna's term on bed rest had finished, it was Nicolas' turn to experience sleepless nights. Clancy had been harassing him non-stop, and keeping the matter from Luanna was beginning to take its toll.

"What are my options?" he thought, turning over on his pillow, trying to find a position where it may have been comfortable to sleep. *"I can't tell her about Clancy...And I can't give in to his demands. I can't very well do what he is asking of me, can I?"*

He wondered.

In his darkest moments his thoughts wandered...he began to doubt that the new life he'd made in Gold Creek was anything but just a fantasy. He wondered if he was only pretending. Sooner or later your past always catches up with you. Maybe what Clancy was saying was the truth. At heart, Nicolas belonged on the land, on the run. Not cooped up in a tiny mining town, in the middle of nowhere, working as a school teacher.

But there was Luanna. She needed him. He'd made a vow to her, and that was more important than anything. He couldn't just leave her – that would be unforgivable.

* * *

Luanna had no sense of sound, but despite her handicap, and her

occasional absentmindedness, she was finely attuned to the moods of others. Another side effect of having a sensitive, creative personality. And she could tell something was wrong with Nicolas. Far from his usual open, affable self, he seemed to have become withdrawn into himself. He was snappier than usual, and any time Luanna tried to ask him what was wrong he only brushed her off, tried to explain that nothing was wrong.

"It's just this time of the school year, it's very tiring," he said, one night. "The older students have their exams coming up and there is a lot of extra work to teach and grade."

Luanna was sympathetic. "I know it can be stressful for you. You have a lot to deal with down at the school. All the children love you, though," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm sure they know you're doing your best."

He took a sip of his tea and nodded. "Yes, I'm sure they do. I just don't want to let any of them down."

"I understand." Luanna was quiet for a moment, wondering if she should press any further. "Are you sure it's nothing else?"

He smiled at her briefly, but the smile stopped at the corners of his mouth, not reaching his eyes. "I'm sure there's nothing else. What else would be wrong?"

Luanna smiled and dropped it. But she had to wonder. She still hadn't told Nicolas that she'd found his secret box of items from his past. She still wasn't sure about how to broach the subject, if it was something he really didn't want to talk about. Or if there was something dangerous lurking in his past, that she might accidentally

unearth by speaking about it.

But with his mood becoming more and more withdrawn, Luanna worried that it had something to do with what she'd discovered in that box. She'd only ever known one side of Nicolas - the quiet, diligent schoolteacher. But what she'd found in that box had shown her a different side.

She watched Nicolas pick up his bag full of books and teaching materials as he straightened his clean, tailored jacket and his formal hat. She imagined what he may have looked like before, in his dusty jacket, his Stetson hat and his cowboy boots. How could the two men be the same person? Strange in a way, but she could imagine it. Maybe someone with a less vivid imagination would be shocked to discover his wild side, wouldn't know how to reconcile the two.

But Luanna had no problem doing so. She knew people were complex, that they could have two sides, a side they showed publicly, and one they kept private. She knew a little of suppressing her true nature. Here she was in Gold Creek, trying to be the perfect, sensible wife, when really she had her own wild spirit that she was hiding.

So she understood. And she longed to tell her husband that she understood, that he could talk to her about it. No matter how bad it was she wouldn't be shocked, or think any less of him.

"Is that what he is afraid of?" she wondered, as she watched Nicolas leave down the path, waving to her as he went. *"Does he worry that I will judge him, not be able to see past it? I know that people can change, and have things in their past that they might regret."* Part of her was a little hurt he wouldn't open up his heart to her, to show her the deepest, darkest parts of his past. In a way it was like he didn't trust

her.

She sighed. *"Perhaps he is simply trying to protect me."*

She continued to fold her laundry as she mulled over the matter. *"He may be trying to keep me safe, but in a marriage, we need to be open with one another. Something is clearly bothering him recently, and if it has something to do with his past then I want to know about it."* She put down the sheet she was folding and made a firm decision.

"This has gone on long enough. Tonight, when Nicolas gets home, I will tell him what I found in that box, and we will finally talk about it."

* * *

"I can't believe you opened that box!"

"I'm sorry," Luanna exclaimed. "I didn't realize that in a marriage we still kept separate things that the other isn't supposed to look at."

Nicolas was pacing back and forth, running a hand through his hair. "It's not like that. Some things are allowed to remain private, you know."

He had his back to Luanna, so she couldn't tell what he was saying. "Pardon? Nicolas, you need to turn to speak to me, remember?"

"Of course I remember!" he snapped, and turned back towards her. He saw the look on her face, how upset she was. "I'm sorry," he said immediately. "I didn't mean to snap about that."

But Luanna was already hitching up the length of her skirt, ready

to run from the room. She couldn't believe that Nicolas could be so snappy with her, especially about her handicap.

"Luanna where are you going?"

"I don't want to speak to you."

"Please, we can't just have a fight like this, and have you run away. We need to talk about it, sort it out."

"I should be the one who is mad at you, not the other way around," she exclaimed. "You're angry about me looking in the box, but what about what I found in it? All those things you have kept hidden from me?"

"I didn't...hide them from you," he tried to explain. "At least, not because I was trying to deceive you."

"Really?" she asked. "Because it feels as though you were trying to deceive me. Trying to trick me into thinking you're a different man to who you really are. Now I know what your character really entails."

"I didn't trick you, Luanna!"

"What would you can it then, pretending to be something you're not?"

He continued to pace, muttering, "You're one to talk."

"What did you say?" Luanna asked, genuinely not catching what Nicolas said. She was starting to get frustrated that he wouldn't stay still, as if he didn't want her to see what he was saying. "If you have something to tell me, you need to look at me."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't turning away from you deliberately."

"It seemed like you were." The hurt dripped from her voice. "So what did you say, just now, when I couldn't see your lips."

"I said that I'm not the only one to be pretending that I'm someone I'm not."

Luanna was genuinely baffled about what he meant. "Are you talking about me?" she asked, frowning. She took a step backwards when he nodded. "What are you talking about? I didn't deceive you before we met! If you're talking about not mentioning my deafness, that was Rosella's omission, not mine."

"I'm not talking about that," he said, still pacing, but remembering to stand still with his face towards Luanna when he was speaking.

"What are you talking about then? I haven't pretended to be something I'm not..." But as she spoke she trailed off and dropped the arms that had been fixed on her hips. She had the sinking feeling that she did know what he was talking about. She'd been feeling like an imposter for a long time, trying to be someone she wasn't: the calm, sensible, perfect wife that Nicolas wanted.

But he knew she wasn't those things. It was clear now. She blushed red as she realized that he had seen through her all along.

He kept his head down, and even though his lips were partially hidden, Luanna could see that he wasn't talking, that he didn't want to speak the words out loud.

"I see," she said. "I am a huge disappointment to you."

He lifted his head back up, his sandy-blond hair falling into his eyes. "You're not a disappointment, Luanna." His voice was gentle, but there was an air of frustration to what he was saying. "Just...a lot to handle at times."

"A lot to handle?" Her eyes were wide. "Well, I'm sorry I am so difficult to 'handle'! I am a person, though, not a piece of a livestock. I'm not one of your students, Nicolas. You don't need to 'handle' me." This time she really did flee from the room, slamming the door as she went.

Nicolas was left alone, his head still bowed. Nothing had gone how he'd wanted it to. All that fighting, and they hadn't even sorted out the issue of the tin box. He sat down and placed his head in his hands. "*So Luanna knows everything...*" he thought. With sorrow, he worried how much worse this made things. Instead of feeling relief that his secret was out, and that he could share it with his wife, he was worried about her safety. Better for her to remain ignorant, in case Clancy ever came knocking for him. Then she could claim she knew nothing, and be telling the truth.

"This knowledge puts her in danger," he thought. *"Now I really need to do something. Either find the money, or take more drastic action. The time for deliberating has come to an end. I need to act, and act fast."*

* * *

"I do love her wild ways, deep down. But sometimes I think she would be better off without me, in some ways..." he thought, on one particularly dark night. *"Maybe she deserves someone better than a man who is simply pretending. She thinks she's married to this simple school teacher, and in a way I feel as though I am deceiving her. If she really knew who I was she*

would hate me. Maybe she would take off in the middle of the night, return to Chicago. I could hardly blame her."

He had to stop this way of thinking. He was beginning to remind himself of Luanna, the way her imagination ran away from her, worrying that the worst might happen. There's risk with everything in life, but it's better to have faith and hope in God, rather than worrying your life away, fretting about things you can't control. He didn't think Luanna would really leave him, any more than he would leave her. But late nights and deep worries could lead to these kinds of tricks of the imagination.

He decided to get up and warm some milk, hoping that it might help him to sleep. Or at least calm him down a little. *"Then it will be time to sleep. In the morning things will look different,"* he thought, throwing the covers off.

As he heated the milk over the stove, he began to feel his nerves calming already. "Why do troubles always seem worse at night time?" he wondered out loud, searching through the pantry for a cup. The only light he had to guide him was the moonlight outside, and he accidentally knocked over a stack of cups as he fumbled his way in the dark. His instinct was to cringe, and to hope that the noise hadn't woken Luanna up. Then he remembered that the noise would not disturb her, and he was glad she would at least get a peaceful sleep.

As he bent down to pick up the pile of cups he thought he heard the sound of sticks moving, cracking, outside the window. He paused for a second, not making a move, to see if the noise returned.

"Perhaps it's just a bird...maybe one of the chickens has escaped again. Maybe Luanna left the gate open again."

As he heard the noise again, he began to really hope that it was just a chicken out there. He never thought he'd be hoping that Luanna had left the gate open, but right then an escaped chicken seemed like a blessing compared to what he feared might be out there.

The noise was too loud for chicken feet. This was a heavy footstep. A human footstep.

Nicolas remained bent down, his heartbeat almost stopped as he kept listening for the noise.

He couldn't stay bent down there forever, though. He could hear the milk boiling over on the stove, and he knew that he had given himself away. If there was someone outside the window, then they knew he was there. There was a clear view into the kitchen, and Nicolas had made such a commotion when he'd knocked the cups over that there was no doubt he was at home.

Besides, he wasn't a coward. He stood up and faced up to whatever it was there.

Staring back at him through the window was Clancy.

"Time's up, Nicky."

* * *

A REVELATION

* * *

Gold Creek, 1851

Luanna woke up the next morning to an empty house. Thinking that Nicolas had simply left early to prepare for his lessons for the day, she didn't think too much of it, and happily trotted into the kitchen, intending to make herself a cup of hot cocoa. It was an unusually cold day for California, and for a moment Luanna was reminded of home, which made her extra happy in a way that surprised her.

"Perhaps I am getting a little homesick," she thought, chuckling to herself. She never thought she'd be homesick for Chicago, or its cool weather. She reached down into the pantry for a cup and stopped in surprise when she saw all the cups knocked over onto the floor.

"Oh, Nicolas..." she said out loud, tutting to herself as she tidied them up. "He must have been in such a hurry that he didn't even notice he'd made such a terrible mess."

She stood up and went over the stove, stopping dead in her tracks when she noticed the fire was on, and there was a burnt out pot in it. She realized she could smell burning metal, and something else. Walking closer she peered into it, only to find dried up, burnt milk inside, with the bottom totally blackened and a hole beginning to burn through the bottom.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, feeling annoyed. "What a waste of a perfectly good pan. What a terrible mess. How could Nicolas have been in such a rush that he could leave the pot burning like this? It

seems like something I would do..."

She reached down and turned the fire off. But there was something odd about the scene, something that was troubling her. The milk was totally burned and evaporated, and the hole in the bottom of the pan could only have been made if the milk had been boiling for a long time.

"What time did he leave this morning?" she wondered, starting to get worried. "It's really not like Nicolas to leave things in such a state. He is usually so careful and conscientious. Unlike me - this is the kind of mess I would leave, if I got distracted by something. But Nicolas is not absentminded like I am..."

Something was wrong, she knew it.

Without bothering to tidy the mess, and forgetting to even grab her bonnet and gloves, she took off out the door and began to run down towards the school house. She had to find out if her husband had turned up for work that day.

* * *

She flew in through the doors of Gold Creek School to find twenty students sitting at their desks, staring forward at nothing. Luanna couldn't hear them, but she could see their lips moving and knew they were becoming restless, talking and gossiping amongst each other. She knew they wouldn't have been behaving like that if Nicolas was present, or if he'd just stepped out for a minute.

No, he hadn't turned up for the day. That was obvious.

Luanna's heart began to race as she looked around the room. With so many mouths moving, so many children trying to get her attention, she was overwhelmed, not knowing who to focus on first. The largest boy in the class, a red headed boy called Samuel, waved at her, trying to get her attention.

"Mrs. Williamson?" he was calling out.

She nodded and began to walk towards him. "Have you seen Mr. Williamson this morning?" she asked, frantically.

Samuel shook his head. "He didn't turn up, we're all just waiting for him." Luanna had to concentrate hard to make out what he was saying. Her mind was already racing with a dozen images of what could have happened.

"Maybe he's had an accident," she thought. "Maybe he's laying somewhere, unconscious, with no one to help him."

But that didn't make sense. The abandoned pot of milk. The mess in the kitchen. That didn't point to an accident. That pointed to him deciding to make a run for it in the middle of the night. She began to feel her legs go from under her, and she reached around desperately for a chair, with the students crowding around trying to help her. They called out to her, asked if she was alright, but she couldn't hear them, and she didn't answer them.

But she was not alright. She rested her head forward on a desk and thought her darkest thought. *"My husband has left me in the middle of the night, and now I am all alone."*

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and it was one of the students, a

young girl, trying to get her attention. "What's wrong? What's happened to Mr. Williamson?"

Luanna shook her head and tried to keep her thoughts straight. "Nothing, I'm sure he's fine." She looked around at the classroom full of distressed looking children. She hadn't meant to make them worry, and she wanted to reassure them all that things were normal. Forcing a smile to her face, she pulled herself up and beamed at the class.

"There's nothing to worry about," she said in her calmest voice. "Mr. Williamson is just not very well today." She saw their frowns, and the way they turned to each other to whisper. Even though she couldn't hear Luanna could tell they didn't believe her. She didn't blame them - the way she'd flown into the schoolhouse, it was clear that everything was far from okay. But they were just children. Luanna had a responsibility towards them now. If Nicolas really had run off, then it was down to her to take care of his classroom.

All the students' little faces looked up at her expectantly. She wondered if she should just send them home for the day. But that would only cause more concern, and every single one of them would go home with gossip, about what had happened to Mr. Williamson and his wife. Until Luanna knew exactly what had happened she wanted things to appear as normal as possible.

"I'll be giving the lesson today, while Mr. Williamson is ill," she explained, straightening up her outfit. It was then that she realized she'd left the house without the proper attire. *"Oh well, it hardly matters now, I'm only in front of school children,"* she thought, wondering how difficult it was going to be to teach a class full of students when she couldn't hear any of them.

But she made it through as bravely as she could, teaching the class till the end of the day, trying to think about what her husband would do and follow his lead.

"He loves these children..." she thought. *"He can't have simply run away."*

And what about Luanna? Didn't he love her? As she dismissed the class, remaining brave till the end, she waited till they left to finally cry.

"Maybe he doesn't love me...maybe he never did. Oh, my odd ways must have gotten too much for him in the end." She sat for a moment with her head hung, sitting on one of the tiny seats that were built for the younger children. *"I knew he never wanted a deaf wife, one that needs so much looking after, and causes so much trouble for him."*

She sat and sobbed for a moment before she pulled herself together. "Come on now, this is no way to act," she told herself. Instead of crying, she turned to prayer, asking for clarity about the situation, rather than feeling sorry for herself.

A little peace settled over her once her prayer was said, however, she was still barely able to stand up. *"How will I face everyone in the town, now that Nicolas has run off to return to his old life?"* she wondered.

She stopped suddenly, and sat up straight. His old life.

She thought back to the letters she had found. About how there had been troubles with a debt Nicolas had owed to someone, a man who he considered a father figure, but had turned out to be bad news.

"Maybe..." she thought with hope, thinking about the burned milk and the discarded cups on the floor, the way the kitchen had been left in a state. *"Maybe he didn't really leave me. Maybe he was taken against his will. Perhaps this Clancy person has come back to get what he thinks he's owed, and kidnapped Nicolas in the middle of the night!"*

Oh, but it all sounded too fantastical. Too much like one of the stories she read, or made up in her own head. It was much more likely that Nicolas had simply left.

"But he wouldn't, he just wouldn't..." Luanna thought. *"He's a good man, and though he has this secret wild side, he wouldn't just abandon his wife and students like this."* She held tight to this thought, as she bowed her head and prayed again.

* * *

A REUNION

* * *

Gold Creek, 1851

"Clancy," Nicolas tried to plead, as the old man hovered over him, swinging a pistol and swaggering to and fro. "Please, don't do this."

"It has to be like this Nicky, I'm afraid."

"Why?" Nicolas asked, struggling with his hands tied behind his back. "What about all the times we've been through, old man..."

"Don't call me that," Clancy snarled. "I took you in and acted like a father to you, but you never acted like a son to me. Not after you betrayed me."

Nicolas continued to struggle as he tried to reason with the man. "Just because I didn't want to live the way you live, doesn't mean that I betrayed you..."

Clancy took a step forward and pointed the pistol right at Nicolas's head. "You took off and abandoned me. And for what?" His voice was low, barely a hiss. "So you could play house with some deaf girl, and teach a bunch of ungrateful school children?"

Nicolas kicked out his feet, sending Clancy flying. Springing to his own feet he lunged for the pistol before Clancy could get to it, and pointed it down at the old man he had once considered a father. "This was never about the money, was it?" Nicolas asked, his voice shaking. "You just don't want to see me live a normal, happy life, abiding by the law!" His voice was becoming angry. "Well this is what I choose

now, and you have to accept that."

Nicolas took a step closer as the old man trembled beneath him. "And don't you ever speak about Luanna like that again, do you hear me?"

The old man nodded. "Nicky, please don't shoot me."

Nicolas kept pointing the pistol for a moment as he backed away, towards the horse that was standing there waiting. He leapt onto the mare's back, and picked up the reins before he finally dropped the pistol to the side. "I'd never shoot you, Clancy. That's the difference between you and me. This is exactly the life I chose to leave behind."

He turned the horse around, but before he went he said over his shoulder, "But if you ever threaten me and Luanna again, I'll have you thrown in jail. Now get out of Gold Creek, Clancy, unless one day you decide you want to change your ways as well."

* * *

Luanna could hardly bear to leave the schoolhouse, and she stayed inside till darkness began to fall, not wanting to face anyone outside, in case they had heard the rumors.

She didn't hear the knock at the door, or hear Rosella's footsteps, or notice her old friend till she was right beside her. Rosella knelt down gently and made sure that Luanna could read her face. "I thought you might be in here," she said gently.

"So everyone's heard then, have they?" Luanna asked. Her tears had dried, and her head was beginning to clear. Now it was just a

matter of deciding what to do next. She felt as though her dreams of adventure in Gold Creek were dead, and she may as well return to Chicago, to her old job as a cook, if they'd still have her.

"Come on," Rosella said, taking her hand. "Let's get you back home."

"I don't think I can bear to go."

"Well it's no good staying here, when it's about to get cold out. The sun will be setting soon. Come back to my house instead," Rosella suggested. "We can put the fire on and talk."

No amount of talking or sitting by the fire was going to make Luanna feel better, but she stood up anyway, taking hold of her friend's hand. As she did so, she noticed the strange look on Rosella's face.

"Rosella? What's wrong? Do you hear something?"

Rosella nodded. Her eyes suddenly popped open, and she grabbed Luanna's hand tight and began to run outside, pulling Luanna with her.

"What is it?" Luanna tried to ask, but Rosella was dragging her into the street.

"Just come with me!"

* * *

The entire town was outside in the street, standing in the middle of Gold Creek main street, gawking at a sight in the distance.

Everyone - even Clarabelle and Betsy - were shouting and exclaiming, pointing towards a figure bounding on horseback, racing towards the town. Dust was flying up behind the cowboy, as the horse reared on its back legs, skidding into the town.

"Who on Earth..." Clarabelle murmured, and beside Luanna, Rosella gripped her hand tight.

"It isn't...can it really be?" Rosella asked, her mouth agape.

"Mr. Williamson!" the children called out, running towards this foreboding figure, riding into town like a wild outlaw.

Luanna couldn't hear the gasps and shouts, but they were there. Everyone was in shock to see Nicolas Williamson, mild-mannered teacher to the children of Gold Creek, transformed into this wild cowboy on horseback.

The black horse galloped into town, neighing and rearing, as Nicolas pulled to a stop besides Luanna, jumping off and taking her into his arms.

No words were needed, and Luanna didn't need to hear anything in that moment. All she needed to do was feel Nicolas' heartbeat beating against hers. In that embrace, they seemed to communicate more than they ever had before, Nicolas telling Luanna that this is who I really am, and I came back for you. As Luanna hugged her husband she was telling him, *"I accept you for who you truly are. Do you accept me?"*

The rest of the crowd thinned, giving Luanna and Nicolas their privacy. Rosella, relieved that her friend was okay, waved and said goodbye.

Luanna looked up at her husband, staring at the strange man in front of her, dressed so differently, with his hair strewn all over his face. She'd never seen him like that, but she loved it. "I'm so pleased that you've come back," she said, tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks. "Pleased doesn't even really describe it. I am overjoyed, actually. I think I could burst from the joy!"

Nicolas returned her embrace, and leaned down to kiss her on the lips. "Oh, my sweet Luanna. I hated every second that I was away from you. It was like torture."

"Did they hurt you very badly?" she asked, drawing his head back so that she could look at him properly.

"Not too badly," he said, her face between his hands. "The worst part was being away from you. I was more worried about how you were coping the whole time."

"What happened though? Did Clancy simply let you leave? That is who had you, isn't it?"

Nicolas nodded. "He didn't let me, no. I had to escape. I let him know once and for all that he can't mess with me." He stopped and took Luanna's face between his hands. "That he can't mess with us, and our new life here."

Luanna's mouth was agape. "Nicolas, I've never heard you talk like this. Nor act like this! Standing up to an outlaw like Clancy, escaping

from him...riding into town like that. Such a scene!"

"Did you mind?" he asked, staring down into her eyes.

They were filled with tears of joy, of excitement. "No," she whispered. "Not at all. I loved it."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Nicolas, you must know by now that I am not the perfect, conventional wife who can stay calm and still and quiet all the time. I long for adventure as well."

His frowned a little. "Luanna, I'm sorry if I ever tried to change you, or made you feel bad about any of that. I just wanted you to be safe."

"You can't always keep me safe though. Just because I am deaf..."

"Shh," he said, hating to hear the words. "Luanna, I don't see your handicap when I look at you. I just see a wild, creative woman, who keeps my life interesting, and who I love with all my heart. You know, deep down, I love your adventurous side as well. I won't try to change it anymore, I can swear to that. Being apart from you was terrible, and I never want that to happen again."

Luanna glanced up at the huge black horse, who was eyeing them off beside them. "It seems you have a lot of adventure still in you. Is life in Gold Creek really what you want? I can hardly believe it is, after seeing you ride in like that."

He nodded firmly. "There's different sorts of adventures in life, isn't there? And being married to you is a great adventure, more

exciting than anything I ever experienced while I was out riding."

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Really."

He brushed his thumb against her cheek. "But is it enough of an adventure for you?"

Luanna gazed up at her husband and thought long and hard about the question, before giving her honest answer, an answer that came from the bottom of her soul. "It is."

* * *

Six Months Later

"Here they come!" Luanna cried out, waving down the lane. "Hello Pastor! Hello Marabelle!"

The dinner - Luanna's second chance to impress - had been a long time coming, and Luanna thought she might burst from the excitement of it all.

Nicolas walked up behind her at the window, wrapping his arms around his wife for a gentle embrace. "They're still too far away to see you, let alone hear you," he said, laughing. "They're still a mile down the road, Luanna."

"Oh, you're right," Luanna said, spinning around. "There's still plenty of time for trouble to find me." She glanced over Nicolas' shoulder at the dining table, spread out with an opulent feast, fitting for Gold Creek's most well-respected residents.

She raced over to the table and picked up her pie. For the hundredth time she looked it over, checking for any burnt spots or signs that it wasn't right. "Here," she said, digging a fork in where it wasn't noticeable. "Try this, and tell me if it is alright."

She reached over and placed the fork in Nicolas' mouth, and waited anxiously for his answer.

He pulled a strange face, as though he didn't realize what he was tasting. He chewed the contents over for a minute or two, his eyes wide open, before swallowing it and looking at Luanna.

"Oh, it's terrible, isn't it?"

Nicolas was still staring at her with shock. "Luanna, what did you put in that pie?"

She thought frantically. "Well, the flour of course, and the plums, and the sugar."

He coughed and looked down. "Sugar? Are you sure it was sugar and not salt?"

Luanna gasped as she looked over her shoulder, seeing the pastor and his wife quickly approaching the house. "Oh no, I've done it again, haven't I? Another one of my disasters! What am I going to tell John and Marabelle? I...I..."

Across from her, Nicolas burst out laughing.

"What...what?" Luanna asked. "Why are you laughing?"

He reached over and scooped her up into his arms. "Oh my dear

sweet Luanna, I am only teasing you."

She leaned back and gave him a playful little pat. "Oh, Nicolas! How could you..." But she was soon in tears of laughter herself, as she realized Nicolas had only been teasing, lightening the mood.

"So it's really okay?" she asked, wiping the tears away from her eyes.

"It's absolutely perfect, Luanna. The entire dinner is. Just like you."

"I thought I'd made another one of my mistakes! But they are becoming less and less these days, aren't they?" Luanna asked.

"They are," Nicolas had to admit. "But I hope you keep making some. After all, that's what keeps my life interesting, Luanna. Life on the land was nothing compared to life with you. I love you, my darling."

Luanna smiled up at him, thrilled with what her life had become, and excited about a perfect evening ahead. "I love you too, Nicolas. Our life together will always be a great adventure."

* * *

THE END

If you have enjoyed reading ***BRIDES OF HOPE & DESTINY AND THREE BRIDES FOR THREE WAR COMRADES*** series, you may want to check it out another **6 BOOKS boxed set** (2 NEW series NEVER published before and is ONLY available in this boxed set) that might interest you.

*Here's a sneak peek at **CHRISTMAS MAIL ORDER BRIDES** series (NEW series NEVER before published):*

Book1 ~ Lonely Justin Saved By His Weary Christmas Bride . . .



1902 Akron, Virginia

“Papa!” Alaya screamed at the top of her lungs. It was a wail of pure anguish that could be heard clear across the county. Never before had such a scream ever left her lips and as she stared at the man she had loved for all her twenty-seven years, laying on his death bed, she knew she would never feel such anguish ever again, she would never allow herself to.

“Come Alaya,” her mother said, wrapping her arms around her and trying to console her eldest child. “He is gone my love, and we have to accept that.”

Her mother’s words sounded like those of one of those horror novels she loved to read. Actually, his passing was like she was living her greatest fear and her legs gave way beneath the pressure of the tsunami of life that rolled over her. She sobbed uncontrollably in her mother’s arms, having lost her first love- her father. The man who had

stood by her side throughout it all. She felt like she had been raked through the fire and her soul dragged out of her through her heart.

She sobbed... she wailed... she cried...

At the end of it all they allowed her half the day by his side, and when the coroner came to take his body away, she walked behind the slow drawn carriage all the way to the funeral home where she said her final goodbyes. Her life would never be the same again- not without him. As she slowly made her way home, grief gave way to reality and the bells of the old cathedral chimed the loss of her father, the town's most beloved member of the council. He was her family's sole bread winner and now... Well, things were going to change drastically... there was no doubt about that.

For three days there was nothing but silence in the house, her six siblings left her to her own space to mourn her loss, speaking to her only to remind her that she had to eat. On the fourth day when she emerged for his burial, she spoke to no one. Tightly gripping her mother's hand and trying her dearest not to fall apart again was her sole mission. When the many faces of the mourners and well-wishers went on their way, she again holed up in her room and did not come out until her mother's voice could be heard trying to keep her siblings in line.

They were seven, she being the eldest and the youngest being no older than four with a penchant for mischief and ears that ignored all warnings. But when her face emerged from her quarters he ran to her for an embrace and she willingly accepted it.

"Why must Mama speak to you a million times before you take heed?" she asked the little imp who smiled at her before resting a kiss

on her eyelids...her weary eyelids.

“I listen,” he countered, hugging her and nestling his face in the crook of her neck. She chuckled, allowing him this one fib that would make him feel better about his wrong doings. She really was in no mood to dispel it in any event. Looking beyond them to where her other siblings had paused in their daily chores, she saw pity across their faces and it instantly angered her.

“What?” she asked them in annoyance.

“Are you okay?” her eldest brother asked. She liked him the best, for he was kind of heart and gentle in spirit, but for the moment his question angered her.

She chose to kiss him on the cheek, instead of responding to him in a manner he did not deserve. He took her seat in the kitchen and they all sat with her in silence. Her father had been a hard man to like, he had been a strict man and most of them had never truly connected with him. But he was always so strict, and they all could definitely agree on that.

“I am okay everybody,” she said and tried to muster a smile for their benefit. They didn’t buy into her act but they had the good senses enough to leave her be. And so breakfast continued on in a tense silence. It was the first one they’d all sit through together since her father had died.

“I want to speak to you all about something, he mother began, and even before the words left her lips Alaya knew exactly what she was going to be speaking about.

“What is it mother?” her rather obnoxious little sister, Aira, asked.

Her mother took a deep breath before she continued speaking and she could hear the desperation in each word. “Many of you will now have to seek jobs as your father brought all the money in. He left us a bit of money, but after covering his burial cost we do not have much left.”

“Work?” Aira said, slamming her fist on the table. “I cannot go out and work now, I will get calluses and no man will want to marry me!”

“Because your sole purpose on the face of the earth is to have some man want to marry you, isn’t it?” Alaya asked rolling her eyes. She really had had enough of her sister’s shenanigans and childish temperament.

“Just because no man wants you, doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want to get married some day!” her sister snapped back at her.

On a regular day she would have lashed back at her sister, but she did not have the energy to argue with her today. Besides, her baby brother was too busy covering her in kisses for her to give in to the negative backlash of her arrogant and prissy little sister. One thing was for sure though as she listened to her mother detail the things that would have to change around the house, and that was that she would have to find herself a wealthy husband, or a job very soon.

* * *

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Published by:
SPEEDY PUBLISHING LLC
40 E MAIN ST, #1156
NEWARK, DELAWARE 19711

Cover Designed by Kevin Farnell.

Digital Edition

Manufactured in the United States of America